

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SUFI PATH



DR. ANAB  
WHITEHOUSE

The Interrogative Imperative Institute

Brewer, Maine

04412

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For my shaykh and all those spiritual luminaries who preceded him. Their lives of sacrifice, perseverance, nobility, integrity, courage, love, and compassion have, through the Grace of God, helped make my spiritual journey possible.





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## **Introduction**

By the Grace of God, my spiritual guide knew far, far more than what I have heard him say on any given occasion. Unfortunately, I have forgotten far, far more than what I remember of what has been related to me by him.

Moreover, I have written far less than what I remember of what he taught me. The result of this funneling process is the present book – *An Introduction to the Sufi Path*

Everything that is good and correct in this book comes, by the Grace of God, through my shaykh or spiritual teacher who was willing to accept me as a reclamation project. Everything that is incorrect in *An Introduction to the Sufi Path* comes from my own shortcomings and ignorance.

The material contained within *An Introduction to the Sufi Path* is intended to stimulate reflection concerning a variety of themes that are important to spiritual life in the midst of everyday life. God willing, the content given expression through the different chapters constitutes -- both individually as well as collectively -- a Sufi perspective.

However, one does not have to be on the Sufi path or inclined to that path in order to engage the material in this book. Anyone with an interest in spirituality and mysticism will find, God willing, an abundance of themes within the boundaries of this work that are able to form the seeds of contemplative reflection for any faith background.

None of the topics is dealt with in anything remotely resembling a definitive manner. The idea was to introduce a problem, issue or focal orientation in each essay and, then, proceed fairly quickly, to give something of the flavor of a Sufi perspective concerning the theme being considered, before moving on to another topic.

During the course of this book's ninety relatively brief essays, a fair amount of introductory material is given concerning the nature of mysticism, in general, as well as a broad outline of the Sufi path. Perhaps, this material will help correct a lot of misunderstandings that many people seem to have acquired in relation to both mysticism and the Sufi Path.

Although all of the essays of this work can be woven together to form, God willing, a unified whole, there is no need to read the essays in

sequence. In fact, in some ways, the sequencing of the essays in the *Table Of Contents* is largely arbitrary and suggestive. If a reader wishes to do so, then she or he could pursue alternate sequences of chapter readings according to inclination and interest.

Each essay is linked, in a variety of ways, with the rest of the material of the book. Nonetheless, for the most part, few, if any, of the essays presuppose that other essays of *An Introduction to the Sufi Path* have been read already.

The material probably would be best read a little at a time. While one might be able to digest the information contained in each of the chapters within a short period of time, the reality that underwrites the information of any of these essays cannot be grasped so easily ... not because of obscurity, but because of depth, richness and subtlety. Consequently, at the very least, each of these essays should be given time, reflection and serious consideration beyond that which is required to take in a certain amount of information.

Furthermore, the reader should not suppose the truths to which the essays allude can be understood fully merely through intellectual effort, or by one's own, unaided struggles. Indeed, there is far more beneath the conceptual surface of the Sufi way than the rational mind can conceive.

*An Introduction to the Sufi Path* is just a starting point. The real path lies beyond the horizons of this work.

There are numerous issues and topics beside the ones that appear in this book which might have been discussed were not. Furthermore, other travelers on the Sufi path might have treated the topics that were discussed in this work through a very different style, vocabulary and emphasis.

Considerable time was given to reflecting on the pros and cons of writing a book in terms of the form and content which this book has assumed. May God accept the intentions associated with the decisions that are being given expression through this work.

Finally, given that I am not a shaykh or spiritual guide, there might be those who wonder why a person might write this sort of book. While my understanding is constrained by the limits of whatever my spiritual capacity might be, as well as by the character of what God has assisted

me to grasp, I did have the opportunity to work closely with my shaykh for sixteen years.

As a result of that proximity, I had an opportunity to learn from my guide in a wide variety of circumstances. This book reflects my way of processing that set of experiences.

I might not be a realized human being. Nonetheless, during the sixteen years that I served my shaykh, something more dynamic was going on than just occupying space.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Bismillah**

Practitioners of the Sufi path preface what they intend to do with the term "Bismillah". This means: in the Name of God. Actually, from the Sufi perspective, the more precise rendering of the meaning of "Bismillah" is: in the Name of Allah. "Allah", which translated literally is: 'the God', is believed by the Sufi masters to be the all-inclusive Name of God.

All-inclusiveness in this case has a very specific meaning for the Sufi masters. It refers to the way in which the various Names and Attributes of God are, in a sense, so many different kinds of principles of Divinity manifested through the prism of the reality of God's primary Name—that is: Allah.

God signs Divine manifestations with many different kinds of ink and signatures, according to the Names and Attributes which underwrite such manifestations. However, the One writing the checks is always the same: the One who is invoked through the Name of Allah, irrespective of the particular inks and signatures being used in any given set of circumstances. All of the activities, manifestations and signatures come by authority of, and under the umbrella of, the all-inclusive Name of Allah.

By way of a very rough illustrative example, to help provide a framework of sorts for the foregoing, consider the following. In the material world we each have different roles to play and serve a variety of functions.

We are mothers and fathers. We are daughters and sons or sisters and brothers. We are neighbors or acquaintances. We are workers and/or students. We are wives or husbands. We play musical instruments and/or we are sports enthusiasts. We are collectors and consumers. We are citizens and foreigners. We are movie-goers and/or we are theater-goers.

There are many different kinds of activities and interests in which we are engaged. We have a variety of talents and capabilities.

Nonetheless, everything we do can be considered to be done under the authority of, and in the name of, the one who is known as Mary Smith or David Jones, and so on. As such, our names have a public and legal standing. Our names give expression to the reality which stands behind that name.

Moreover, the mere mention of our names has the capacity to induce smiles, anger, sorrow, pride, ambivalence, anxiety, love and a host of other thoughts, emotions and actions. In a sense, names come to have a reality of their own, although we realize the capacity of the name to elicit responses is because of the context of relationships, experiences and interactions in which the bearer of that name is involved.

Sometimes we have nicknames. Sometimes we have aliases or a.k.a.'s (also known as). Sometimes we undergo legal name changes. Sometimes people refer to us in formal or informal ways. Sometimes people call out to us through endearments or in intimate ways.

In all these cases, the reality being referred to is the same. The differences in name or attribute being invoked are entirely a matter of the functional dimension or relationship being addressed.

Somewhat analogously, to say: "Bismillah", is to proceed with the following understanding. One is calling on God in an all-inclusive manner involving all the countless ways in which God relates to a human being.

Human beings are linked to God's Essence through the capacities, powers and principles that are the realities or meanings to which different Names and Attributes of God give expression. God is our creator. God is the One who nurtures us. God is our protector and strength.

God is the provider of our sustenance, both physically and spiritually. God is the Comforter. God is the Friend. God is the endlessly rich One.

God is the One to Whom we repent. God is the One Who forgives. God is the One Who nurtures us. God is the Generous One.

God is the One Who arranges and harmonizes everything in an ordered fashion. God is the source of justice. God is the hearer and seer of all things. God is the giver and taker of life.

God is the One Who bestows blessings independently of our deserving such gifts. God is the One Who embraces us with affection and love. God is the One Who guides us and the One who can permit us to be led into error.

God is the One who raises us up in honor as well as the One who lowers us in humiliation. God is the One Who is powerful as well as gentle. God is the One Who is infinitely subtle.

God is the One Who is both manifest as well as hidden. God is the One who destroys, and God is the One Who heals. God is the One Who is endlessly compassionate and merciful. God is the One Who is transcendent and beyond any likeness of which we can conceive. God is independent of us, and, yet, God is constantly solicitous of our welfare and well-being.

God is our judge. God is our trustee. God is the source of all forms of light.

The number of ways in which God relates to us is infinite. The Names and Attributes through which we call upon God and which give expression to the realities of God's various modalities of relating to human beings are similarly infinite.

To invoke: "Bismillah", involves more than the understanding one is addressing God and asking God to bless whatever follows. For the practitioners of the Sufi path, the above invocation is the realization—the depth of which varies with the individual—that everything which occurs is a manifestation of one or more of the modalities of relationship linking God and human beings. There is nothing taking place within us or outside of us which does not give expression to the realities encompassed by the One to Whom the all-inclusive Name of Allah makes identifying reference.

Furthermore, the invocation of "Bismillah" is undertaken with the intention—the sincerity of which varies with the individual—that everything we do should be done for the sake of the One through Whom everything is possible. In other words, to intend to act in the Name of God means the following: whatever we intend to do, should reflect the will of the One in Whose Name we are purporting to serve, remember and praise through our intended actions.





## Chapter 2

### Dhawk

Sufi masters often use the term "dhawk", or 'tasting', to refer to certain aspects of the experiential character of the mystical process. Every mystical experience and every facet of the Sufi journey has its own characteristic taste, signature, flavor, texture, and quality.

Over time, and with the guidance of one's teacher, one develops a sense of taste concerning the experiential character of various dimensions of the Sufi path. Eventually, God willing, one acquires some degree of facility in identifying, and differentiating, the phenomenological taste properties of various states, stages, stations, conditions, and so on.

For example, the dream state has a certain quality or experiential taste to it. One who has dreamed has a sense of some of the differences between the dream state and the waking state.

One may not be able to articulate what some of these differences are. Nonetheless, the phenomenological or experiential qualities of the dream state are, for the most part, capable of being distinguished from the experiential qualities of the waking state. Generally speaking, we recognize these states for what they are when we undergo them.

Of course, just as one can be confused or uncertain about the actual character of some physical sensation, so too, sometimes, we may experience confusion or uncertainty concerning the nature of a given event and how to categorize it. For instance, many of us have had experiences—both waking and dreaming—when we, at least for a time, were not sure whether we were awake or dreaming?

The reason for the uncertainty may be that the phenomenological character of a given experience may manifest a mixture of qualities. Some of the features of the experience normally may be associated with the dream state. Other facets of the event normally may be linked with the waking state. The experience has a strange taste about it.

For most of us, the aforementioned strange admixture of dreaming and waking are relatively infrequent. In a sense, they are the exceptions which prove the rule. This is the case since despite our uncertainty about what to make of such an experience (i.e., was it a dream state or a waking state), nevertheless, the strangeness of the experience itself has a

phenomenological quality or taste to it that we probably would recognize in the future should it happen again.

The dream state has a certain taste to it. The waking state has a certain taste to it.

The different events of the world have certain experiential qualities or tastes to them. Thus, an athletic contest has certain phenomenological properties which give expression to one kind of taste. On the other hand, a musical rehearsal tends, for the most part, to manifest a different set of experiential qualities or tastes. The realm of work has still other characteristic phenomenological qualities.

The states of the ego have certain signature tastes associated with them. For example, a striving to be accepted by others has one kind of taste signature, and the condition of selfishness has another set of experiential taste qualities.

Emotions have characteristic phenomenological properties or tastes which, generally, allow various emotional experiences to be distinguished, one from the other. Anger is one kind of taste, and greed has a different sort of phenomenology to it.

The angelic realm offers the possibility of a variety of experiential qualities or tastes. This is also the case with respect to satanic forces.

The true self has a unique and infinite set of signature tastes. The dance with Divinity is a dance unlike any other, but, one can learn to recognize the presence of Divinity in one's life through developing an appropriate sense of taste.

The false self has a seemingly endless capacity for disguising itself. Yet, all of this deceit shares certain characteristic taste qualities which permit the person of insight to detect the presence of the false self, despite its changeling tendencies.

According to Sufi masters there are countless realms, universes, and worlds. Each of these gives expression to a spectrum of properties which, under appropriate circumstances, can help give rise to infinite varieties of experiential tastes.

Our capacity for experiential tasting far exceeds the capabilities of language or the rational mind to conceptually describe those experiences. Many, perhaps most, experiences cannot be articulated with any degree of precision because we don't have the concepts or words to give linguistic intelligibility to those events.

Moreover, inventing new words and conceptual categories may not resolve the problem. For example, Sufi masters indicate that the vast majority of the Sufi path is totally beyond the reach of language and rational concepts.

In other words, the experiential tastes generated through the mystical journey have dimensions inherent in them which thoroughly resist linguistic and rational analysis. Consequently, although one may be able to allude to some aspects of the phenomenology of such experiences, at a certain juncture, one passes into realms of experience and taste for which language and rational concepts can have no access, no matter how creative and clever the efforts may be that are used to try to penetrate into these realms.

According to Sufi masters, the rational mind and the physical senses (i.e., hearing, touch, taste, smell, seeing and proprioception) are not the only capacities we have for tasting experience. For instance, there are capacities within us which are able to recognize and, to varying degrees, understand different spiritual tastes.

The heart (this does not refer to the physical organ known by this name) is a spiritual capacity said by practitioners of the Sufi path to be able to have direct, unmediated experience of Divinity. This form of tasting is known as gnosis, and it comes in many degrees, levels and intensities.

The spirit is another mystical capacity. The spirit is described by Sufi masters as being the medium through which one imbibes the wine of Divine love.

As is true in relation to the condition of gnosis, there also are many vintages of Divine wine that, if God wishes, could be tasted by an individual. Each vintage has its own unique flavor and bouquet.

Sufi masters talk of still other capacities for spiritual experience. Each of these modalities constitutes a facility for tasting different experiential dimensions of the human journey to God.

The masters of the Sufi path also indicate that every human being has a unique capacity for experiencing God. This unique capacity is unveiled when the true self comes to ascendancy after the false self disappears.

Consequently, there are tasting experiences we each can have which no one else can have. These sorts of experiences give expression to our mystical potential to have an essential, personal and unique relationship with Divinity.

From a certain perspective, therefore, the Sufi path can be construed as the science of tasting. Under the direction of a spiritual teacher, one learns the methodologies, practices and etiquette which are necessary to enable one, when rigorously pursued, to not only distinguish among experiential tastes but, also, to determine the meaning, significance and value of such taste experiences in relation to one's spiritual potential.

Through tasting, one arrives, if God wishes, at the very essence of our capacity for tasting. Furthermore, tasting, of one variety or another, constitutes the essence of our relationship with Divinity.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Initiation**

Initiation into a Sufi Order or silsilah (a specific chain of spiritual teachers and teachings) does not guarantee anything, in and of itself. Initiation is a door of opportunity which has been opened to the seeker.

The problem is, many people seek different things from, and through, initiation. Some people believe there are special blessings associated with taking initiation. These people seek initiation for those blessings and do not wish to go beyond this.

Other people believe initiation places their lives under an umbrella of spiritual protection of sorts. These people seek the security they feel comes with initiation. However, like the previous group of people, they generally have little interest in pursuing mystical matters any further.

Still others maintain initiation establishes a relationship with a friend of God. Many of these people tend to believe that on the Day of Judgment they may benefit from the intercession, on their behalf, of the people of God with whom they are associated through initiation.

There also are people who seek initiation because it may be the fashionable thing to do. Different periods of history and different localities bear witness to the waxing and waning of people's level of interest in the mystical path.

Some people perceive a shaykh to be something like a Sufi Godfather. Whatever worldly problems such people encounter, they believe the Sufi teacher will be able to "fix" things for them. Consequently, they seek initiation in order to have ready access to this valuable resource.

Among the people who seek initiation, are those who feel belonging to a Sufi Order is good for the image. These people believe initiation makes them appear mysterious or intriguing or spiritual. Adding these dimensions to their personality appeals to them.

There are some individuals who are drawn to a shaykh, but they don't know why. They experience happiness, contentment, and peace when in the presence of the shaykh. As a result, they seek initiation in order to be able to enjoy the benefits which have come from being in the presence of the shaykh.

Some of the people seeking initiation do so out of broken lives. For one reason or another, they have been cast out from society and find acceptance, kindness and love nowhere but at the feet of the shaykh.

Many of those who seek initiation are in search of the miraculous. They have heard of the wondrous deeds and powers associated with Sufi shaykhs, and they hope to acquire some of these abilities. For them, the Sufi path is like an alternative technology which they hope to exploit in one way or another.

The people who seek initiation with the foregoing reasons may well have their beliefs confirmed in one way or another. God gives to people according to the wishes of Divinity ... not just because people come with the correct understanding or intention.

Nonetheless, in essence, the purpose of the Sufi path is, for the most part, quite different than most people suppose is the case. Initiation is a door of potential opportunity which leads, if God wishes, to a realization of: the purpose of life, our true self, and our essential spiritual capacity.

However, in order to achieve the foregoing realizations, one must destroy the myriad forms of idol worship in which one's life is entangled. Initiation marks the first step of the spiritual journey toward this end.

Most of us are unaware of the numerous forms of idolatry to which the false self is committed. Moreover, even when we are aware of some of the ways in which our idol worship manifests itself, we don't know how to rid ourselves of these practices, and we don't have the strength to do so on our own.

Initiation is a gift of God. Or, perhaps, more accurately, initiation is the external packaging that wraps an inner gift of great beauty and richness.

Among other things, the inner gift gives expression to: guidance, wisdom, knowledge, love, compassion, certainty, gnosis, mercy, kindness, intimacy, friendship, forgiveness, protection, support, encouragement, sincerity, truth, justice, joy, and peace. The gift is the shaykh or spiritual guide.

In reality, the outer form of the teacher is the locus of manifestation through which the spiritual gift comes. The teacher is like one of those jewel boxes in which every time one opens up one box, another, inner jewel box is revealed.

Each box represents the preceding spiritual guide in the spiritual chain. These inner jewel boxes continue until one reaches the most inward jewel box, the very first Sufi shaykh, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Every Sufi shaykh is but a particular reflection of, on the one hand, the different jewels of the entire spiritual order, and, on the other hand, and most importantly, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Moreover, the Prophet is the perfect human being, and as such, is one who reflects, in complete harmony, all the Names and Attributes of God.

When a person takes initiation, the individual places his or her hands in the hands of the shaykh. Simultaneously, the person being initiated is placing her or his hands in the hands of all of the preceding shaykhs of the Sufi Order into which the individual is being initiated. This includes, of course, the hands of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Nevertheless, all of these hands are but loci of manifestation for the Hand of God Who is the One with Whom one, ultimately, is taking initiation.

A Sufi master is the veil through whom God has chosen to act in order to assist the individual along the stages of the mystical path toward the realization of true spiritual identity and essential capacity. The guide is one who is cloaked in the Divine Attributes which actually underwrite and supervise the process of spiritual guidance of the initiate.

A Sufi master is one who has been given permission by God to act under the spiritual authority of the Prophet. The spiritual guide, working in accordance with the above framework, assumes responsibility for helping people in a variety of ways. However, the most important form of assistance is in relation to the difficult task of helping people to gain freedom from the slavery, illusions and idolatry of the false self.

Initiation is not an event which can be delimited to the initial covenant of allegiance. Initiation is actually an intention.

This intention carries far beyond the act of swearing fidelity to a shaykh or guide, and through that teacher, to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and, ultimately, to God. The spiritual responsibilities entailed by the intention of initiation must be observed, as best one can and as best God permits, throughout the spiritual journey of the individual.

Because most people seeking initiation do not appreciate the depth, subtlety or richness of the mystical path, initiation actually is an open-ended commitment. The nature of this open-ended commitment is to a path of purification. God willing, this path of purification opens one up to the mysteries and realities inherent, but hidden, in the initial act of initiation.

The mystical path is a path of unfolding to the many layers of truth contained in the process of initiation. As the path unfolds through different stages, tests, trials, stations and so on, then, God willing, one's understanding of the responsibilities and benefits of initiation is purified.

With the purification of the intention underlying the seeker's initiation, then, if God wishes, the actions arising from, and through, such understanding become more and more sincere. One becomes a true seeker of God, rather than a seeker in name only. In effect, one has become initiated into the inner realities of initiation.



## **Chapter 4**

### **God**

Our concepts of God get in the way of our relationship with God. Our opinions about God prevent us from coming to know Divinity.

Human beings have been generating thoughts concerning the nature of God for thousands of years. Many of us suppose our understanding of Divinity is more advanced and sophisticated today than was the case with so-called primitive peoples.

After all, philosophers have explored all manner of questions concerning the existence and nature of God. Theologians have reflected on these matters. Scientists have commented on these issues.

Surely, given that so much time, effort and consideration has been directed toward developing the idea of God, this idea ought to be more refined now than ever before. Surely, in the light of all the developments in logic, rational methodology, critical thinking, radical theologies, hermeneutics, deconstruction and post-modern perspectives, we should have, in this day and age, a more superior idea of God than existed in ancient times.

According to the Sufi masters, one of the mistakes consistently made by many people, both ancient and modern, is to assume God is accessible through rational thought. People who make this assumption really have no knowledge of what the parameters and limitations of rationality are, nor do they have any knowledge of God. They guess and speculate about both, but they have no knowledge or understanding of either one.

The practitioners of the Sufi path indicate one can no more stuff Divinity into the container of rationality, than one can pour the ocean into a thimble. Moreover, this comparison actually flatters rationality rather excessively.

The mesh of rationality is not sufficiently fine to grasp the subtlety of Divinity. The capacity of rationality to penetrate into issues is not even sufficiently deep to penetrate into the origins of reason, let alone encompass the One Who has made reason possible.

The light of reason only can illuminate that which the qualities of its light can render visible. It is a matter of capacity, both of reason as well as

that which is to be made visible. The capacity of reason cannot contain the capacity of Divinity.

Whatever we know of God has come from God and not from reason. The Prophets, saints and spiritual guides did not find their way to God by reasoning their way to Divinity.

The Sufi masters indicate revelations -- together with mystical unveilings, states, visions and stations -- always have been the primary modalities through which God has disclosed something of the nature of Divinity. Reason may come into play after the fact of such experiences, but reason is not the channel through which these experiences enter into human awareness in the first place.

Of course, we may use reason to assign significance, value, meaning, and purpose to mystical experience, once the latter has occurred. However, here, too, the Sufi masters maintain God is the best One to inform us of the character of those experiences.

The practitioners of the Sufi path indicate we need to learn how to listen with our hearts to that which is being communicated to us by God through our spirits. When the mind is informed by the prepared and purified heart, according to the capacity of the mind to grasp such understanding, then the mind will know as much as it is ever going to know with respect to Divinity.

The proper etiquette of the mind, with respect to engaging those aspects of Divinity which are accessible to reason, is to be receptive to the counsel of a sincere heart (whether one's own or that of a spiritual guide). When the mind becomes assertive and aggressive in its relationship with Divinity, Divinity, out of embarrassment for the faux pas of rationality, lowers veils of indiscretion over the gaze of reason.

Sufi masters point out our relationship with God is adversely affected by our rational projections onto mystical experience. This is where much error and distortion is introduced.

People begin to confuse their ideas of God with the reality of God. People assume the imaginative machinations of their minds are messages being communicated to the heart by God.

This is extremely dangerous territory. Many people have become hopelessly lost in such regions. They waste their lives journeying

toward the mirage of their own ignorance, eventually dying of spiritual thirst in the desert of the mind.

Without the help of an experienced spiritual guide, there is no possibility of escaping from the foregoing predicament. The map, compass and sextant of reason are useless here unless complemented and corrected by one who knows the secrets of navigation through these regions.

The Sufi masters indicate we know God through our relationships with God. The Names and Attributes of God all give expression to different modalities of relationship with Divinity.

For example, Divine qualities of: love, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, mercy, creation, majesty, beauty, and so on, are disclosed to us through our relationship with God through these qualities. Just because our senses, mind, heart, and spirit engage these relationships through different modalities of understanding does not alter the fact that each modal engagement of a given quality of God constitutes a relationship with Divinity of one sort or another.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, the ways in which God chooses to relate to us do not permit reason to deduce anything about the nature of Divinity which has made such relations possible. God, for instance, has made the relationship of love possible between God and human beings.

We can experience this relationship through various modalities of understanding and on different levels and with different degrees of intensity, richness, etc.. However, nothing in this experience permits any valid or defensible inferences about what else God is beyond this: God is One Who makes such relationships possible.

The same holds true for all of other relational engagements of Divinity. Our knowledge of God is restricted to the relationships which God discloses to us through our experience.

Moreover, our knowledge of these relationships is limited by the character of our capacity to grasp different dimensions of these relationships. Just as reason has its limits of capacity to grasp reality, so, too, according to the Sufi masters, do our spiritual capacities stop far short of the ability to grasp the infinite fullness of the reality of Divine Essence.

Nonetheless, of all the instruments of knowledge which God has made available to human beings for the purpose of relating to Divinity, there is one which is best suited to bearing loving witness as well as knowing servitude to Divine beauty and majesty. This capacity resides, so to speak, as a mystery in our spiritual essence.

This capacity may not be able to circumscribe or exhaust the reality of God. However, it exceeds the capacity of reason to do so by billions of spiritual light years.

The Sufi masters indicate that, God willing, we can deepen our relationship with God and increase our knowledge of the significance and character of this Divine relationship. To accomplish this, there are certain dimensions of our being which must be prevented from trying to exceed the mandate of their respective capacities. Among other things, this means we should set aside our reasoning and opinions concerning God.

Part of wisdom is to know what range of capacities we have available to us for relating to God. Yet, wisdom also involves knowing what capacities are appropriate to use during different relational engagements with Divinity in order to derive the most benefit from those engagements.

Reason plays no part in either kind of wisdom. In fact, our reasoning and opinions concerning God are antagonistic to the emergence of such wisdom.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Fatiha**

There is a great need, by those who decide to undertake the Sufi journey, for the blessings of spiritual association. One of the ways in which the opportunity for such association is provided is through the sessions of gathering often referred to as "fatiha".

Normally, these gatherings take place at least once a week. From time to time, there may be more than one session during any given week.

Thursday, sometime after sunset, is a common period for these sessions. However, depending on circumstances, other days may be selected as well.

On the surface the fatiha appears fairly simple and straightforward. The person (usually, but not always, the shaykh) recites some chapters of Divine revelation. Blessings are sought for certain spiritual personalities from the past who are of significance to the Sufi Order under whose authority the fatiha is being conducted. Prayers of petition are offered seeking spiritual benefit for both those participating in the fatiha, as well as for all humanity.

Sometimes, in certain orders, sacred music and songs are listened to after the completion of the recitation of the fatiha. Sometimes, in certain orders, sacred turning is performed following the fatiha.

Almost invariably, there will be time set aside during the session for some amount of chanting or remembrance of God. These remembrances may take on a wide variety of forms from order to order and from shaykh to shaykh.

In addition, there often also are talks or question and answer periods at some point during the fatiha gatherings. Furthermore, sometimes the shaykh will talk privately with different initiates.

However, fatiha is more than just simple acts of: recitation, prayers, chanting, music, turning, and discussion. There are deeper structural complexities to the gathering.

These complexities are due to the fact there are many levels on which the fatiha takes place, of which the spatial-temporal coordinates of the session is but one aspect. Depending on what level one engages and/or is engaged by during the fatiha session, very, very different kinds of

process are observed to transpire. At the heart of this level of engagement issue is the dimension of spiritual association between a fatiha participant and her or his shaykh. As a result of such spiritual association, a fatiha session has the potential for affecting, God willing, every aspect of the human being. Body, ego, mind, emotions, heart, spirit and other dimensions of the individual may all be affected, to varying degrees, by what transpires during fatiha as a result of spiritual association between shaykh and devotee.

Spiritual association is the prism through which the lights of recitation, prayers, chanting and so on are cast upon, and affect, God willing, the properly receptive devotee. Spiritual association is the lens which focuses the blessings of the gathering on different individuals in different ways according to the efforts and struggles which are taking place.

More specifically, the body, ego, emotions and mind must all be trained. The body must be cleansed, as well as accept some degree of constraints on its movements and its appetites. The ego must be quieted. The emotions must be brought into proper balance. The mind must learn to stop wandering and concentrate on the tasks at hand.

In addition, the heart must be turned away from the influences of the body, ego, emotions and mind. The spiritual qualities of the heart must be permitted to manifest themselves, and this only can occur, God willing, after the heart has been purified and polished.

The spirit is the locus for the manifestation of true spiritual love. However, this love will not be manifested in its full beauty until the spirit has been perfected.

The fatiha gatherings can be a powerful source of assistance and support in all of the foregoing. This spiritual help is an expression of what is meant, in part, by the blessings which come from spiritual association.

The way in which one approaches fatiha, even before the session begins, is very important. For example, one must have a clear spiritual purpose in attending fatiha.

Fatiha is not a social club. Fatiha is not a matter of fashion, status, or prestige. Fatiha is not a career move. Fatiha is not a leisure time activity.

Fatiha is an opportunity to seek God and be brought closer to the realization of the secret of one's essential nature. Fatiha is a chance to turn away from the world and the ego.

Fatiha is a means of throwing overboard all the jetsam of one's existence. Fatiha is a doorway to the deepening, strengthening and enrichment of faith.

Fatiha is part of a journey toward acquiring qualities such as: repentance, humility, patience, gratitude, sincerity, and dependence on God. Fatiha is a medium for healing, God willing, all our spiritual diseases.

One does not go to fatiha looking for mystical experiences. One does not go to fatiha preoccupied with thoughts of acquiring lofty spiritual states or miraculous powers.

One goes to fatiha to struggle with, and undermine, one's desires and entanglements. One goes to fatiha to learn about submitting to God's will.

The mere physical presence of someone in a fatiha gathering does not necessarily guarantee that individual will receive the blessings of spiritual association. If one does not attend fatiha with a clear spiritual purpose in mind, one, potentially, will be depriving oneself of the blessings of spiritual association in direct proportion to the cloudiness and darkness of one's purpose.

Not only should one have a clear spiritual purpose, one also ought to have a pure intention. Everything one does should be done out of a desire to please God as an end in itself.

One does not seek to please God in order to get something. God is not a means to an end.

One struggles and sacrifices because one loves God. A love which is dependent on getting something beyond love is not love.

Many of the benefits which the fatiha gatherings make possible, God willing, involve lessons of spiritual etiquette. There is an etiquette appropriate to every circumstance and relationship. Spiritual association takes one by the hand and teaches one about these etiquettes.

To begin with, there is an etiquette appropriate to one's relationship with God. One needs to learn to become a servant of God in order for this etiquette to be manifested.

There is an etiquette appropriate to the Prophets and saints who constitute the foundation on which fatiha rests. Part of this etiquette is incorporated in the portion of the fatiha proceedings dedicated to a remembrance and commemoration of, as well as a seeking of blessings for, one's spiritual progenitors.

There is an etiquette appropriate to one's relationship with one's spiritual guide. This is so irrespective of whether one's guide is physically present at the fatiha or not. In fact, an understanding and appreciation of the different varieties of etiquette is acquired primarily through one's spiritual association with one's guide.

There is an etiquette appropriate to the other people who attend the fatiha gatherings. There is an etiquette appropriate to the people one meets after leaving fatiha, for if the lessons of fatiha are left in the room where the gathering takes place, one might as well not go to fatiha.

There is even an etiquette appropriate to one's essential self. This etiquette will not be properly observed until one learns to sacrifice the false self on behalf of the true self.

Fatiha is not said just for the benefit of those who attend the gathering. It is said on behalf of all of humanity and creation.

Moreover, it is offered on behalf of those souls which have passed on from this world.

It is said for the sick and the lonely, for the homeless and the hungry. Fatiha is said for the hearts which have been broken and the lives that have been abused. Fatiha is said for the families of the participants, as well as for both the local community and the communities of the world.

Fatiha is intended to be a spiritual fountain which will flow into the lives of people outside of the fatiha. Fatiha is intended to be a radiating beacon of blessings to be shared by everyone independently of considerations of merit.

Through the blessings of spiritual association which -- God willing -- come through the gathering of fatiha, one learns how to pray for others. One learns how to support, encourage and assist others. One learns how to love and serve others.

Fatiha is an occasion to recite the Names and Attributes of God. Fatiha provides an opportunity to reflect on, and contemplate, the wonders of God's creation.



Fatiha provides much material on which to work after one leaves the fatiha gathering. At the same time, the blessings of spiritual association, which, God willing, are conferred during fatiha, provide one with the strength, courage and perseverance to struggle with the 'homework' material generated during fatiha and, therefore, not waste the time between fatihas.

Association is not just a matter of physical proximity. Association is, in essence, a matter of spiritual intimacy. According to the masters of the Sufi path, God has established spiritual association as one of the primary ways through which blessings concerning the realization of: the purpose of life; true identity, and essential capacity are to be conferred.

Spiritual association is a bridge created by God which enables the individual to travel from illusion to truth and from the false self to the true self. Fatiha is a vehicle on the bridge of spiritual association.

The blessings of spiritual association come in very subtle forms. One cannot see the mode of transmission. Moreover, one even may not be aware of the transforming effect which such spiritual association is having.

One may go to fatiha gatherings week after week and feel one is receiving no benefit. However, if one is sincere in one's efforts, then, God willing, there shall come a time when one will notice determinate changes coming into one's life.

These changes alter the character of one's opinions, attitudes, interests, understandings, behaviors, priorities and commitments. The nature of these transformations increasingly will come to reflect the spiritual qualities of the guide with whom God has brought one into contact for the purposes of receiving the blessings of association.

If one does not give up on fatiha, then, God willing, fatiha will not give up on the individual. In time, the blessings of spiritual association with the teacher will manifest themselves, if God wishes, through, among other things, the countless benefits of the fatiha gatherings.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Nisbath**

Nothing is possible on the Sufi path unless, by the grace of God, there is a spiritual connection which has been established between an individual and a spiritual guide. This connection is known as "nisbath".

The state of this connection affects whether or not, God willing, spiritual progress will occur. If the connection is spiritually healthy, then if God wishes, development will take place. If the connection is not healthy, then either there will be little, or no, advancement on the path, or the individual will fall away from the path altogether.

The responsibility for maintaining the health of the connection rests entirely with the initiate, although, obviously, the spiritual guide is not idle in this regard. The Sufi master is busy doing whatever can be done to help the initiate to have a proper understanding of, and attitude toward, the fundamental importance of the spiritual link between the spiritual guide and the individual.

While the responsibility for maintaining the health of the spiritual link belongs to the initiate, in point of fact, initially, nisbath is a gift from the spiritual teacher to the individual. The attraction which an individual feels for the spiritual guide is a manifestation of this nisbath.

Nevertheless, at some point, the individual must decide whether or not to accept what is being offered by the shaykh. Even if the individual is not consciously aware of what is going on, the person needs to begin to grasp the importance of taking steps to care for, and nurture, the spiritual relationship which has been established.

In a sense, there is a degree of reciprocation on the part of the initiate when she or he starts to deepen the seriousness of purpose with which spiritual matters are engaged. From the initiate's increasingly sincere commitment, comes the attitudes, intentions, and so on which are necessary to cultivate the seed of nisbath which was planted originally by the shaykh.

The willingness of a person to cultivate the offer of nisbath by the shaykh is a function of, at least, two factors. To begin with, it reflects, or resonates with, the relationship or association which existed in the realm of spirits prior to birth between the shaykh and the individual.

Nisbath does not begin just in this world. In fact, nisbath is a reestablishing of an already existing link. The shaykh's offering of nisbath in this world is, in a sense, a reminder to us of this reality.

Sometimes, a person will come into contact with a spiritual guide and no "connection" may take place. This could mean the individual needs to look further to find his or her spiritual family.

On the other hand, there are occasions when a shaykh may look after, or help, an individual even though the individual may not be part of the pre-established spiritual family. When appropriate circumstances unfold, the individual may move on to other things.

The other factor affecting the willingness of an individual to cultivate nisbath with the spiritual teacher concerns spiritual capacity. Not everyone has the same ability in this regard, anymore than everyone has the same intellectual, creative, musical or athletic abilities.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, spiritual capacity is brought to fruition through nisbath. The more the seed of nisbath is cultivated, then, God willing, the greater will be the individual's progress toward realizing the potential of spiritual capacity.

Nisbath is, in a sense, a channel between the essential capacity of the spiritual guide and the essential capacity of the individual. As the character of nisbath is strengthened, deepened, enriched and so on, then, if God wishes, more and more of the individual's spiritual capacity is unveiled.

By the grace of God, the initiate is being spiritually fed through the umbilical cord of nisbath. As the nature of nisbath undergoes maturation, so, too, will the character of the spiritual nourishment which comes through this connection.

The support, protection, strength, kindness, generosity and so on which come through nisbath are what sustain the individual on the spiritual journey. Without it, one would not be able to take a single step on the mystical path. As such, nisbath is a reflection of Divine love for the initiate.

In the beginning, the individual tends to find cultivation of nisbath to be easiest when in physical proximity to the shaykh. By seeing, hearing, and interacting with the shaykh, nisbath has the opportunity to develop in a variety of ways.

Correspondingly, when the person starting out on the path becomes, for whatever reason, physically removed from the spiritual guide, such an individual may find the spiritual terrain difficult to navigate. Although the Sufi guide is always with the initiate, irrespective of physical separation, the individual's failure to realize this can become a source of spiritual difficulties.

If God wishes, an initiate learns, in time, how to be in spiritual association with the shaykh under all circumstances, even those involving physical separation. In other words, the individual comes to understand that nisbath does not depend on time and space. This connection is a spiritual one which transcends physical conditions.

Nonetheless, Sufi masters highly recommend that, in the beginning, the initiate should associate, as much as possible, with the spiritual guide, even if only physically. If God wishes, spiritual association will emerge out of physical association.

Nisbath is a very personal and intimate relationship with the spiritual guide. Each initiate has her or his own unique relationship with the shaykh through this spiritual connection.

Sometimes, initiates who do not understand the nature of nisbath begin thinking in finite, non-spiritual terms. For example, they consider the shaykh to be a non-renewable, finite resource.

As a result, initiates who think in this manner, become possessive of the shaykh and jealous of anyone who currently may be enjoying the overt, visible attention of the spiritual guide. They do not understand that irrespective of whatever may be going on in a visibly manifest way, beneath the surface, the shaykh's essential capacity, by the grace of God, is looking after all the initiates in terms of the unique nisbath which the shaykh has with each of those individuals.

Unfortunately, many people often feel that if the spiritual guide does not appear to be paying much attention to them, this means the shaykh does not care for them. One of the most important lessons an initiate can learn is the following point. From the shaykh's side of things, nisbath is filled with constant love and concern for the spiritual well-being of each and every initiate.

The individual may break faith with the shaykh. The shaykh, however, God willing, would never break faith with the initiate. As a spiritual guide,

they are under an obligation to honor the Sufi etiquette of the relationship of nisbath.

From the initiate's side of things, there are many things which can poison, if not destroy, the condition of nisbath with the shaykh. Doubt, suspicion, and mistrust concerning the shaykh's integrity as a spiritual guide and human being can be lethal to the health of nisbath with the spiritual guide. Furthermore, heedlessness and rebelliousness concerning the counsel of the shaykh also can be extremely damaging to the individual's nisbath with the spiritual guide.

Fortunately, by the grace of God, the Sufi master is very forgiving and forbearing with respect to the mistakes of the initiates. Among other things, due to their experiences with their own spiritual guides, shaykhs have a very deep understanding of, and insight into, the process of maturation of the nisbath relationship.

Consequently, they know the ups and downs of the long process of cultivating nisbath, both from the side of the initiate as well as from the side of the shaykh. They appreciate what the initiate is going through as she or he struggles with the numerous challenges and trials surrounding nisbath.

In addition to the initiate's ego or false self, there are other agents which can infect nisbath with virulent diseases. For example, satanic forces are constantly at work to undermine the initiate's relationship with the spiritual guide.

According to Sufi masters, satanic forces are very jealous of an individual's nisbath with his or her spiritual guide. These forces know that maturation of nisbath is the key which enables the initiate to realize, God willing, the potential of essential spiritual capacity.

Therefore, satanic forces can be relentless in their various ploys and stratagems to seduce the individual away from nisbath. Moreover, if not for the grace of God, when these forces link up with the false self, as frequently does occur, the combination easily could lead to spiritual tragedy for the individual.

Nisbath goes to the very heart of the mystical journey. It is the ship by which one sails along the streams of life's experiences to the Ocean of Divinity. One needs to be very vigilant concerning its condition so that,

God willing, the ship not only will remain afloat but carry one to one's destination.





## **Chapter 7**

### **Contentment**

There are different kinds of contentment. Some forms of this condition are expressions of a good spiritual orientation. Other expressions of contentment have injurious ramifications for the state of one's spiritual health. Still other modes of contentment are signs of the presence of a spiritual excellence.

One sort of contentment is rooted in the inertia of indolence. When we operate out of this framework, we may see all manner of things which could be improved. If we could introduce such improvements, we would be very happy. Yet, we can't be bothered to do so.

We may not be satisfied with our situation, but we are too lazy to do anything about it. As such, we are content, sort of, to let things continue on as they are.

On occasion, when we are under the spell of this inertial contentment, we may change our priorities and value system. We do this not as a result of long philosophical and spiritual examination about what is and is not important in life. Instead, we undergo changes of outlook, because our laziness will not permit us to entertain any other options.

We become vassals in the fiefdom of the lord of indolence. We must do what our master orders. We must make the necessary accommodations in our lives and have contentment with this order of things.

As serfs, we go about our business of living within the constraints laid down by our lord and master. We take whatever pleasures and enjoyment are possible or permitted within this kingdom. However, our lives consist, by and large, in a very limited repertoire of habits, rituals, customs, and traditions.

There are few degrees of freedom. Initiative is discouraged, if not punished, by the demons within.

Thoughts of revolution scurry furtively about amidst the shadows of our minds and hearts. Unfortunately, there is no leadership or wide-spread support for such an undertaking. In any event, this would take a lot more work than we are prepared to offer.

Given enough time, we become institutionalized under the guidance of laziness. We come to accept the prison we have permitted to be built around our lives. We no longer dream of escape. If we see an exit sign, we back away in fear and loathing.

We feel things aren't so bad. In fact, in many ways they are pretty good.

We begin to resent anything which would threaten the status quo. The idea of change becomes very disconcerting.

We like things the way they are. We have found contentment in our lives.

Another variety of contentment is underwritten by an: 'I'm O.K., you're O.K.', sort of philosophy. This form of contentment comes from a feeling of self-satisfaction with the state of things, especially in relation to our level and quality of performance.

When we gaze through the glasses of this kind of contentment, we tend to give ourselves a high approval rating in the job of life. However, we do so in a modest way.

We think to ourselves: I've done O.K. in school; and, I've done O.K. in my career; and, I've done O.K. financially; and, I've done O.K. in my marriage and with my family; and, I've done O.K. with my physical fitness and health; and, I've done O.K. with my hobbies and leisure time activities; and, I've done O.K. with my maturation of selfhood; and, I've got an O.K. personality; and, I've been an O.K. in-law. The cup of our contentment runneth over.

We look to our friends and acquaintances and say: "Hey, you're O.K. too." We are content with them and the manner in which their check lists of self-approval are filled with O.K.'s.

Of course, if we were really all O.K., the world would not be in the terrible shape it is. However, we have a back-up position: I'm still O.K., but some of you are not O.K..

Problems and difficulties and tragedies are always created by other people. We have not created the terrible conditions which are being manifested in our communities and in society and in the world, but we're doing O.K. in coping with the messes left by others.

In our desire to find contentment with ourselves, we become blind and inured to our contribution to the dismal state of the union. We forget about, or excuse, our: insensitivity; or, impatience; or, intolerance; or, selfishness; or, bigotry; or, disloyalty; or, lying; or, dishonesty.

We forgive ourselves for our lack of compassion. We are extremely forbearing with ourselves when it comes to our thoughtlessness, mistakes, foibles, hypocrisies and insincerities.

We feel justified in our jealousy, envy, anger and hatred. We slough off our rudeness and inconsiderateness as the understandable results of having a "bad" day.

We punish our "loved" ones emotionally and physically, while defending ourselves with: "I'm under a lot of pressure right now". We take: "I'm sorry!" as a useful social formula for clearing the way for us to commit the same act again.

We do not suffer fools gladly. We have contempt for many things and many people in society and allow it to shape and color our interaction with others.

We frequently fail to extend mercy or kindness to others. Yet, we often are affronted when others do not meet our expectations for kindness in our times of need.

The foregoing considerations notwithstanding, we still believe fervently we are more or less O.K.. We may have a few residual, peripheral short-comings, but, essentially we are O.K..

Despite evidence to the contrary, we persist in holding on to the pleasantness which is derived from the general sense of contentment we have with respect to ourselves. Moreover, we tend to resent, and get annoyed with, any suggestion there may be considerable reason why we ought to feel other than contentment with our way of being in the world.

Another kind of contentment involves an irresolvable paradox. We are not content with what we have, but we are driven by the illusion that if certain conditions were satisfied we would be satisfied. Unfortunately, no matter what transpires, we do not find the elusive sense of contentment we believe is just over the next horizon.

This state of affairs is extremely frustrating. We have a very clear sense in our minds of what would give us contentment. However,

when we are able to realize, in reality, the vision or image we have in our minds, the reality never seems to measure up to our mental image of how things should be.

Something is always wrong, or fails to be just so, with reality. Consequently, we are left with a residue of disappointment and dissatisfaction. The amount of this residue will vary with the dissonance between image and reality.

We hunger for contentment. The search for contentment drives and consumes us.

We can almost taste the contentment, but reality keeps filling up our cups with salt water. Our thirst for contentment is never quenched. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. With each sip, we long for more, until we die from our desires.

The opposite of the foregoing is someone who is truly, sincerely happy with, and appreciative of, whatever one may receive. No matter how small may be that which is given to the individual, there is no sense of dissatisfaction associated with the gift or that which is offered.

There is no expectation for more or other than what is received. Instead, the individual feels a genuine sense of contentment with the favors and benefits which God has brought into one's life.

This latter sense of contentment gives expression to a good spiritual orientation. Nevertheless, the Sufi masters speak of a station which transcends the kind of contentment just outlined.

To be thankful for, and content with, benefits and gifts received is one thing. This is difficult enough for most of us.

To be thankful for, and content with, troubles and difficulties is another matter altogether. This sort of contentment cannot be exhibited by someone unless that individual has completely submitted herself or himself to God. It is a mark of spiritual excellence.

Such a person never feels any regret with respect to what God brings into her or his life. This kind of contentment is embedded in an understanding that God knows what is best for one's spiritual advancement, whether in the way of ease or trials.

The individual works with, finds value in, and use for whatever comes into his or her life. According to the Sufi masters, there is an extraordinary degree of peace, humility and happiness contained in this sort of contentment.



## Chapter 8

### Ego

The ego carries a dual portfolio. On the one hand, it is the minister in charge of the policies and disbursements which make all misery and suffering possible. On the other hand, the ego also serves as head of the agency for internal security whose primary responsibility is to make sure nothing interferes with its other ministerial duties and functions.

A brief glance at the curriculum vitae of the ego shows the latter to be extraordinarily well qualified for both of the aforementioned portfolios. To begin with, the ego has a natural talent for deceit and treachery. This talent is nicely complemented by a capacity for manipulation which would be the envy of any right-thinking Machiavellian.

The ego has been schooled in the craft of creating illusions at a moment's notice. Moreover, the ego won first class honors in the theory and application of the art of misdirection. Indeed, its capacity for feats of legerdemain makes magicians weep with envy.

The ego is astonishingly ambitious. This ambition is well-served by its gift for ruthlessness. Furthermore, the ego's tendency to never be content with what it has ensures a constant source of motivation to fuel its ambition.

The ego is extremely demanding and impatient for results. It is meticulous in the way it attempts to ensure others will acquiesce to the bottom line of the ego.

The ego can calculate angles with more precision than a mathematician. Furthermore, it can set an agenda with more skill than a professional caterer can set a table.

Long hours of practice have been spent by the ego to hone its ability to evade responsibility. In addition, the ego is as good as they come in pointing fingers of blame at others.

The ego has a tenacity of purpose which puts the bite of a Gila monster to shame. What is more, the venom of the ego is far deadlier than the poison of a Gila monster.

So single-minded is the ego in the pursuit of its goals and objectives, it will not permit such qualities as honor, integrity, and decency

to stand in its way. It always seeks to get the job done regardless of the costs to others or itself.

The ego is a master of disguise, a chameleon's chameleon. It can blend in with a scene in order to protect itself from probing eyes, while waiting for an opportunity to strike.

The natural inclination of the ego toward suspiciousness of others bodes well for its duties as security officer. The ego trusts no one, and is in a constant state of vigilance lest its interests be threatened. The ego has no sense of loyalty except to itself.

The foregoing speaks to the ego's ability to handle the aforementioned portfolios. However, the present profile would be incomplete if we were to leave out the comments of some of those with whom the ego has worked or interacted on previous occasions.

For example, the ego has variously been described as thoughtless, insensitive and mean-spirited. In addition, the ego is characterized as often being moody, quarrelsome and extremely rebellious.

Many who have had dealings with the ego found it to be stubborn and insincere. Others have found the ego to be dense, ignorant and filled with dark, sinister ideas and feelings.

The ego often has been found to waste a lot of time fantasizing. Moreover, there can be a strong streak of indolence in the ego which sometimes feeds into the fantasies and is sometimes fed by those fantasies.

Many people find working with the ego very difficult and frustrating because it is so self-absorbed. Its narcissistic tendencies just add to this problem.

The ego doesn't take guidance and direction very well. Furthermore, it has a deep-seated hostility toward any kind of authority being exercised over it.

There is a history of episodes of paranoia in the ego, especially when involved in pressure situations. Some clinicians also have noted definite patterns of delusional thinking.

The ego is prone to temper tantrums, as well as explosions of anger, if it doesn't get its own way. Quite frequently, the ego is contemptuous of others.



The tendency of the ego to display strong emotions of envy and jealousy often makes the ego very unapproachable. When one adds to this the intense pride of the ego, the mixture is a very volatile one which is not conducive to friendship or a good work atmosphere.

There has been a persistent pattern of abusive relationships in the past of the ego. This abuse expresses itself through verbal, mental, emotional, physical and sexual violence.

The ego is prone to extremely self-destructive behaviors. Bouts of depression, despair, and alienation intensify these self-destructive tendencies.

A large variety of addictions pepper the pages of the ego's case history. In point of fact, the ego suffers from a congenital predisposition to addictions of one sort or another.

The ego appears to have a sociopathic personality. In other words, there is a strong tendency for the ego to use and exploit people without any sense of remorse. The ideas of morality, ethics and spirituality appear to be foreign to the ego.

There is a strong current of hypocrisy running through the life of the ego. It will profess something on one occasion and, then, turn around and actually do the opposite on some other occasion.

In addition, the ego is pretty poor at keeping promises unless the promise is a means to some further end it has. Needless to say, commitment to others is not high on the list of priorities which the ego has, unless, once again, the commitment is tied to the satisfaction of a need or desire of the ego.

The self-image concept of the ego is highly sensitive and vulnerable to critical comments from others. However, such sensitivity does not prevent the ego from feeling quite free to criticize and judge others.

The ego is incapable of loving others, although it often mistakes infatuation and sexual attraction for the real thing. Due to the emotional distance it maintains with respect to others, the relationships of the ego are usually dysfunctional in one way or another.

The ego tends to be unforgiving. Moreover, the memory of the ego is very selective. Consequently, the ego finds holding a grudge quite easy

to do. On the other hand, the ego can be quite unrepentant for what it does, yet expect others to forgive and forget.

When one combines the poor impulse control of the ego with its inherent capacity for aggressiveness, one is not surprised to observe frequent outbursts of rage on the part of the ego. Furthermore, the tendency of the ego to exhibit poor judgment also combines with its lack of impulse control to generate a lot of misery for all concerned.

According to the masters of the Sufi path, there is only one enemy more dangerous than the entanglements of the world and the machinations of satanic influences, and that enemy is our own ego. Everyone has a ego, so we should beware of the dangers which lurk within us.

Of course, most of us will not exhibit all of the foregoing qualities on a continuous basis. Moreover, not all of us necessarily will display the same package of symptoms of the ego disease syndrome. Nevertheless, on any given occasion, each of us has the potential to exhibit any and all of the possibilities outlined in the foregoing pages.

Daily, this disease ravages our world, our countries, our communities, our families and ourselves. None of us will be safe until this terrible disease is brought under control. All other diseases combined do not even begin to compare with the death and destruction which the diseases of the ego inflict on humanity and all of creation.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Backbiting**

There seems to be something irresistible in the desire to talk about other people behind their backs. Gossip, rumors, innuendo, criticism and character assassination roll off our tongues with such effortless nonchalance.

If pressed, we might have difficulty deciding whether we derive more pleasure through speaking ill of others or hearing ill of others. Like pony express riders, we dash from one station to the next dropping off, and picking up, the hot news of the day. Like a communicable disease, our titillation spreads from mouth to ear and from ear to mouth.

How many lives—including our own, have we made miserable through this time honored tradition? To what extent have we compromised our own integrity and honor by participating in such rituals, even if only passively?

To what degree have we weakened, if not destroyed, our families and neighborhoods and communities due to our addiction to this activity? What manner of mutated enmity, jealousy, envy and arrogance have we spawned through this aspect of social intercourse?

Backbiting seeps up from the darkness, ignorance and malice within us. It gives expression to our perverse capacity to take delight in thinking and feeling the worst about other people.

Like Everest, we are drawn to it because it is there, beckoning to us to come and explore its contours, ridges and secrets. However, once lured, people soon discover backbiting constitutes a challenge which is far, far more difficult to conquer than is Everest.

Through backbiting, we introduce doubts, suspicions and alienation into our gatherings. After all, if we are witnesses to the existence of the reality of backbiting concerning other people, can we not reasonably suppose we may well be the object of this exercise in our absence? Are we so blind to our own foibles that we fail to appreciate what a treasure-trove our lives are for supplying an indefinite variety of gems for the cutting and grinding tools contained in the tongues of our "friends" and acquaintances?

Some people argue that although there are potential dangers associated with backbiting, nonetheless, it serves a useful social function because it is a medium for exchanging information, attitudes, and mores concerning events in society. As such, it is just one of the venues through which the process of socialization goes on, and by means of which, individuals arrive at decisions concerning how they will hook-up with various groups.

The driving force behind backbiting is not an expression of some sort of heuristic device for the socialization process. Nor is backbiting but a species of the courageous search for truth since backbiting is indifferent to the truth or falsity of what passes through its lips.

Whatever constructive benefit may be drawn from backbiting is purely incidental to the *raison d'être* of its being. In fact, the only value, euphemistically speaking, which backbiting has is entirely as a negative exemplar of what one ought not become involved in.

Once one encounters backbiting, as one, unfortunately, inevitably, must, one should understand it for what it is. One should understand what "needs" it serves in us and others and stay as far away from it as one can.

Backbiting poisons the atmosphere of society. Moreover, backbiting pollutes the spiritual ecology of the individual.

For both of the foregoing reasons, the Sufi masters have tried to impress upon the practitioners of the way that backbiting is not a trivial vice. The insidious and treacherous nature of backbiting, along with its prevalence in society, as well as its resistance to being constrained, make backbiting a formidable social and individual evil.

To refrain from speaking ill of others in their absence is a commendable practice. To refuse to listen to such talk is also exemplary. However, Sufi masters indicate that this sort of discipline does not end the responsibilities of a person in these matters.

Removing oneself from opportunities to speak disparagingly of others or to hear negative things said against others is not sufficient. One must seek to not even think badly about others, whether in their presence or in their absence.

The working principle of the Sufi masters is: love toward all and malice toward none. Only by, God willing, inculcating this principle into every atom of one's being, can one resist the siren call of backbiting.

To be aware of someone's shortcomings is not necessarily to be engaged in a mental form of backbiting. Nonetheless, one must exercise extreme caution in such matters.

There must be a separation of sorts between the individual and his or her behavior. One must try to see an act of transgression or indiscretion for what it actually is, but one should offer: compassion for; forbearance toward; forgiveness of; and, encouragement to improve, for the person from whom the problematic act arose.

Furthermore, one should not dwell on such matters or try to disengage the issue from its proper context. In short, one needs to keep things in proper perspective, neither becoming too preoccupied with them or too indifferent to them.

Backbiting is injurious to the spiritual condition of human beings. Backbiting is a heavy veil which obscures spiritual understanding and is antagonistic to spiritual development. To be a Sufi, one must remove all traces of this poison from one's external actions as well as from one's interior states.



## **Chapter 10**

### **Adab**

Adab or spiritual etiquette involves more than learning the rules of social convention governing certain aspects of interaction within a particular culture. In fact, there is no guarantee that what passes as politeness or civility or proper comportment on different social occasions within a given culture and during a particular historical period will satisfy the demands of adab or etiquette in the Sufi sense of the term.

To begin with, spiritual etiquette entails more than just external behaviors. For example, even if one were very polite to people, observing every custom or rule recognized in one's society as appropriate to the situation at hand, one still might violate the precepts of Sufi etiquette if one harbored ill-will, envy, jealousy or contempt with respect to the people one was engaging socially.

For the would-be Sufi, the outward and the inward condition of the individual must be consonant and harmonious with one another. In addition, the inner and outer condition of the individual should constitute a constructive contribution to social interaction.

Secondly, and in concert with the foregoing perspective, in order to observe Sufi etiquette properly, one cannot be indifferent to the people with whom one interacts. One must have a genuine regard and concern for the people with whom one deals, irrespective of whether one knows them or not and, even more importantly, independently of whether they share one's approach to life.

In the realm of conventional etiquette, rules of conduct are often observed merely as a means of facilitating social transactions so that everybody knows, more or less, what is expected of them in any given set of circumstances. As such, conventional etiquette, all too frequently, is a way of treading lightly around people's feelings so that one never has to deal with them as people.

Conventional etiquette is often, though not necessarily always, a way of facilitating social interactions so that we can slip past one another in the least problematic, and, perhaps, most congenial manner. This approach is not without its merits and practical value, but it tends to

fall considerably short of what the practitioners of Sufi adab have in their minds and hearts.

There is a very genuine sense in which, for a Sufi, adab cannot be observed in the absence of love. One must have love: for God; for the servants of God; for the creation of God, and for one's own existence.

Acts of etiquette which do not have some current of love running through them are empty, perfunctory, shallow, and superficial. These kinds of acts may serve as a sort of glue that helps maintain, to a degree, social cohesiveness, but they also can become barriers to meaningful human contact by helping us to avoid human beings in any essential sense.

Indeed, there may be considerable embarrassment and confusion on the part of people if one goes beyond the parameters of accepted norms as defined by conventional etiquette. People tend to become suspicious of any sort of friendliness, openness, sincerity, kindness, empathy or concern which falls outside the rules of etiquette, precisely because there is no rule of conventional etiquette for dealing with these responses. Consequently, one is faced with the daunting prospect of having to deal with people as people and not as categories of rule application from a book of social etiquette.

Etiquette needs to be something more than a set of rules for navigating one's way through the minefields of social foibles. It ought to be an art form which allows one to address the essential needs of other people, while doing so in exactly the manner, and to the degree, required by the circumstances at hand. Of course, knowing what is required in a particular set of circumstances and devising a method to address such requirements in a balanced way, goes to the heart of the art of spiritual etiquette.

The lessons of adab begin at the feet of one's teacher. If one cannot learn to treat one's teacher with adab on the basis of observing the care, love and consideration with which one's teacher interacts with one, and others within the teaching circle, then one will not be able to learn how to treat others with proper adab.

Moreover, if one has no love or regard for one's teacher, one will have no motivation to withstand, and persevere against, the rigors and difficulties of the discipline or training which must be undergone in order to absorb the lessons and art of adab. Confronting and attempting to



subdue one's hydra-like short-comings in the observance and practice of spiritual etiquette is very demanding and frustrating work.

However, knowing that one's teacher had to go through exactly the same sort of process and is now transmitting to one the fruits of such training, gives hope the journey is not an impossible one. Indeed, the love and help that an individual's teacher currently is extending, is but a reflection and continuation of the love and help one's teacher received from his or her teacher in the past.

The teacher/devotee relationship is itself a manifestation of the love and compassion which God has for the individual as expressed through the dynamics of the teacher/learner context. This tradition of love is the only medium of transmission through which the art of spiritual etiquette can be received and absorbed.

By watching the loving, patient, forbearing, compassionate, sincere, and truthful manner in which the teacher interacts with all people, both within, as well as outside, the teaching circle, one develops a taste for, or sense, of the principles underlying the expression of proper adab. By realizing, little by little, the differences of intent, breadth, depth, richness and subtlety between the adab of the teacher and one's own efforts in these respects, one's own approach to the realm of etiquette begins to become transformed.

With God's help, one begins to internalize these lessons. With God's help, one begins to give expression to these values, qualities and principles in one's daily activities.

With God's help, one begins to extend the circle of adab to encompass not only one's teacher, but also the other members of the circle. Furthermore, with God's help, one begins implementing the requirements of adab in relation to: one's family; one's community; one's country; the world; nature; and, the entire universe.



## **Chapter 11**

### **Doubt**

Doubt can be a valuable ally, or it can be a potent enemy. Knowing the difference can take one a long way.

Under a variety of circumstances, there is nothing wrong with a healthy embrace of skepticism, questioning, doubt or reserving judgment. Indeed, this can be quite beneficial, saving one, by the grace of God, from many difficulties and embarrassments.

For example, if someone is known to lie on, say, a semi-regular, but unpredictable basis, then, to exercise caution concerning the declarations of such a person, would seem to be a prudent thing to do. Whether that individual is an acquaintance, or a politician, or a government official, or a business associate, or a writer, or a religious figure or whatever, to have doubts affords one a margin of protection.

Doubt buys one some time. During this period of grace, one can check the alleged facts of an assertion. One can raise questions about inconsistencies and ambiguities. One can reserve judgment until one has had an opportunity to reflect on the statement and/or until additional information is forthcoming which may help resolve the issue.

Having doubts can save one from rushing to judgment and making errors that a greater amount of circumspection might have prevented. Manifesting a certain degree of skepticism, puts some objective distance between one and a given issue and permits one to be in a position to explore other alternatives.

An interesting, but troubling, example of the semi-regular, but unpredictable, liar is the individual. In one way or another, almost all of us lie. These statements of untruth may not necessarily be lies of some, dark, malevolent purpose, but they are lies because they satisfy the conditions of what it means to lie.

These statements distort the truth in some manner. Furthermore, this distortion is introduced knowingly by the individual.

We lie to our spouses. We lie to our children. We lie to our parents. We lie to our friends. We lie to fellow workers. We lie to customers. We lie

to tax officials. We lie to our lawyers. We lie to our doctors. We lie to ourselves.

Sometimes we lie to spare someone's feelings. Sometimes we lie because the issue is too personal.

Sometimes we lie to gain a tactical advantage. Sometimes we lie because we're too embarrassed to tell the truth.

Sometimes we lie in order to please others. Sometimes we lie to exploit or manipulate a situation.

Sometimes we lie just to upset another person. Sometimes we lie because the truth sounds too unbelievable. Sometimes we lie to create a "good" impression of ourselves. Sometimes we lie because it seems simpler and less involved than telling the truth does.

We lie to ourselves about the kind of person we are. We lie to ourselves about how fairly we treat other people. We lie to ourselves about how honest we are.

We lie to ourselves about our values and commitments. We lie to ourselves about the extent of our compassion for other people.

We lie to ourselves about the degree of our selfishness and inconsiderateness. We lie to ourselves about the nature of our love for God.

We can lie to ourselves because the ego tries to sell falsehood as the truth, thus satisfying one of the two conditions for a lie— namely, to distort the truth. We know we are lying to ourselves because in our heart of hearts we are aware of what the ego is doing and why.

The problem is that sometimes our awareness of our lying to ourselves is very weak and faint, and, as a result, the lie carries the moment. Given time and the right circumstances and pressures, the lie may become accepted as truth.

In light of the foregoing comments concerning the way we lie, one wonders why most of us don't tend to exercise more doubt and skepticism concerning our own pronouncements. After all, if one is being prudent to have doubts concerning other people who sometimes lie, then consistency demands we demonstrate the same degree of prudence with respect to ourselves. This is especially so in view of the fact we have

more ample and direct evidence of our own lying than we have in relation to the possible lying of other people.

Unfortunately, few of us embrace a healthy amount of skepticism and doubt concerning ourselves. Doubt is usually reserved for the words, intentions, motivations, attitudes, opinions and actions of others.

This issue of doubt becomes crucial in relation to considering the teachings of mystics such as Sufi masters. Are these people telling the truth? Are they lying? Are they telling untruths but, somehow, have convinced themselves they are telling important truths about the nature of things?

Another possibility, of course, is that we may resist the truth in what they say through the lies we tell ourselves. For instance, we may tell ourselves we have given the mystical perspective a fair hearing when we have not.

We may tell ourselves we have no vested interests which might bias or prejudice our judgments concerning mysticism, but, in reality, we do have such vested interests. We may tell ourselves we have an open mind about where the truth lies, but, in fact, our attitudes, interests, priorities and desires would not permit us to consider anything as true except that which we believe already to be the case.

Whom should we doubt—the mystics or ourselves? How far should we carry this doubt? What are the origins of our doubt? What will satisfy our doubts? How do we go about resolving our doubts? These are all very important questions.

Not everyone who claims to be a Sufi master is one. Consequently, sometimes there are legitimate reasons for an individual to entertain doubts concerning the alleged authenticity of a teacher.

As best one can, and there are limits to what can be accomplished on one's own, one ought to go through a period of questioning and reserving judgment about such claims. Reflect on the matter. Meditate about it. Speak to other people. Read books.

If one can, talk to the person who may or may not be a genuine Sufi teacher. Obviously, one also should question one's own motives, attitudes and intentions in this whole process.

If one is sincere in the way one explores such doubts, the Sufi masters indicate God will guide one to a correct resolution of the question concerning authenticity. Of course, they also indicate one ought to have a healthy doubt concerning the extent of one's sincerity during this exploration.

Once one decides to take the step of initiation and a teacher is prepared to accept the responsibility of guiding the individual, the problem of doubt does not end. Doubt is a prominent tool in the arsenal of the false self.

The false self does not disappear upon initiation. Rather, initiation is, in effect, a declaration of war between the allies of the true self and the allies of the false self.

The forces of the false self use doubt to bait ambushes of constantly changing character. The command and control centers of the false self orchestrate terrorist raids by various cells of doubt.

The intelligence operatives use doubt to demoralize the allies of the true self by generating confusion and uncertainty. Doubt is used to mount campaigns of disinformation which sow the seeds of distrust and suspicion in the hearts of the allies of the true self.

When one is going through difficult times on the path, as such times are unavoidable, one will begin to doubt many things. Among other things, there will be attempts on the part of the allies of the false self to seduce the individual into doubting the authenticity of the teacher's knowledge or ability or love or guidance or compassion or understanding and so on.

If one allows oneself to be seduced in this manner, one will have come, in all likelihood, to the end of any possibility of journeying further or making spiritual progress on the spiritual path. This is so because according to the Sufi masters, journeying on the path is, by God's grace, made possible through the initiate's spiritual relationship to the teacher or guide.

By doubting the authenticity of the teacher, in effect, the lifeline which nourishes and sustains the individual on the path has been sabotaged. If the damage cannot be repaired, the path will become impassable with respect to any possibility of forward spiritual movement.

The critical nature of the dire consequences which ensue from becoming entangled in doubts about the authenticity of one's teacher has a

further twist to it. Pseudo-mystical teachers will use precisely this warning to bind initiates to them.

More specifically, when legitimate doubts arise about the propriety of the "teacher's" conduct or instructions in the case of an unauthentic guide, the "teacher" will blame the victim of his or her manipulations and misguidance. Such "teachers" will say these kinds of doubts are but the activities of the allies of the false self trying to sever the spiritual relationship between "guide" and initiate, and, therefore, the initiate should suppress all such doubts.

The realm of doubt is a very tricky affair. In fact, this realm is so puzzling, frustrating and depressing, many people despair of ever resolving the problems entailed by the issue of doubt.

Many of these people withdraw altogether from seeking to step onto the mystical path. When this occurs, doubt has won another victory. This is so because people who withdraw under such circumstances have succumbed to the relentless pressure of the ego as it casts doubt on the whole mystical enterprise.

One must learn to swim in the sea of doubt, amidst all of its currents, waves and storms. Moreover, while swimming in this sea, one's safety is enhanced considerably if one can tell the difference between a shark and a dolphin.





## **Chapter 12**

### **Listen**

What we hear depends on how we listen. How we listen can be shaped by many factors.

Sometimes when we hear a person talking to us, we are not really listening to them at all. We know words are being spoken. We may pick up words here and there. We even may know the gist of what is being said.

Nonetheless, we are preoccupied with something else. The individual speaking to us is running second best, or worst, in our attention sweepstakes.

On other occasions, we may be both hearing and listening to what someone is saying. However, for whatever reason, we just can't grab hold of what is being said. Our minds are sort of 'fogged in'.

Maybe the topic or issue doesn't interest us. Maybe we are tired. Maybe the other person is not very articulate. Maybe we don't care for the other person all that much and, as a result, find, for instance, empathizing or sympathizing with the individual difficult to do.

We hear with our ears. However, we listen through many other modalities.

For example, we listen through our minds. In other words, we listen through, among other things, our attitudes, values, understandings, beliefs, interests, and memories. All of these shape the way we listen to what we hear.

We listen through our emotions. We filter what we hear by means of our fear, anger, jealousy, pride, lust, envy and so on.

We listen through our moods. Our hope, sadness, apathy, happiness, impatience, and irritability all tend to color what we hear.

We listen through the condition of our bodies. Feeling healthy, tired, sick, hungry in pain, or energetic may affect what we hear.

We listen through our motivational states. We tend to hear what others say in terms of our ambitions, goals, purposes and plans.

We listen through our fantasies. We project the scenarios generated by our imaginations onto the words of other people.

However simple what we hear may be, how we listen can complicate matters very quickly. Our modes of listening are the source of many different kinds of distortion, misunderstanding, and communication breakdown.

We may be able to repeat exactly the words we hear. Nevertheless, the listening context in which those words are immersed can give those words an array of meanings quite far removed from what the speaker had intended.

Sufi masters seek to help initiates transform the way they listen. There are, at least, two stages to this transformation process.

To begin with, emotion, mind, motivation, fantasy, physical condition, and mood all give expression to characteristic ways of affecting the manner in which we listen. Thus, every mode of listening has an identifiable phenomenology or experiential flavor.

Consequently, one aspect of the aforementioned transformation process is to learn how to listen to our modes of listening.

By becoming familiar with the currents running through our internal listening milieu, we will be in a better position to be aware of the many different ways in which our mode of listening is capable of distorting what we hear.

Secondly, we must begin to substitute other modalities of listening for the "normal" methods of listening used by our egos or false selves. For example, consider the following.

When we listen through insincerity, we cannot hear sincerity. When we listen through intolerance, tolerance sounds foreign to us. When we listen through indifference, compassion has a false ring to it. When we listen through impatience, we have no time to listen to patience. When we listen through grudges, forgiveness seems hypocritical to us.

On the other hand, listening through: sincerity, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and patience leads to very different results than when we listen through insincerity, indifference, intolerance, grudges and impatience. Even when the former modalities of listening are not reciprocated by others, we tend to be, for instance, more at peace with ourselves and the world than when we employ the listening modalities of the false self.

There are many other residual benefits, besides a greater sense of peace, which emerge when our way of listening to others becomes more spiritual in nature. In fact, our whole way of interacting with other human beings, as well as the rest of creation, undergoes a transformation.

Quite frequently, when a person first comes to a Sufi shaykh, the individual listens to the spiritual guide mostly in problematic ways. As a result, not much of what the teacher says stays with the individual in a manner which would affect the latter's behavior.

The individual may remember what the shaykh has said. Nonetheless, the connection between what is said and changing the way we listen to ourselves, others or creation continues to elude the individual.

When, by the grace of God, a spiritual inclination arises in the individual to maintain permanent association with the spiritual guide, this spiritual link becomes the seed of the Philosopher's Stone, so to speak, through which the individual's way of listening begins to change.

Through spiritual association with the shaykh, the heart of the individual becomes, by the grace of God, purified. As the heart becomes purified, the individual begins to listen to the shaykh's teachings with the heart and not through the beliefs, emotions, moods, motivations and fantasies of the individual. When the person starts listening to the shaykh through the purified heart, the words of the shaykh begin to seep into, and shape, the fabric of the heart. If God wishes, this leads to further changes of listening behavior in the seeker.

The Sufi master always listens to the individual through love. Whatever we may think or feel, we are listened to with love. Whatever our faults and mistakes may be, we are listened to with love.

Indeed, the spiritual guide listens to all of creation through love. This modality of listening gives expression to one of the ways in which the Sufi master worships and serves God.



## **Chapter 13**

### **Courage**

A Sufi master has said that, God willing, there isn't anything which cannot be accomplished if one has courage and patience. Since patience will be touched upon in a later chapter, the present reflections will concern courage.

The mystical tradition is not an easy path. This is so for many different reasons.

First of all, one must consider the forces which will be aligned against one if one decides to undertake the mystical quest. These forces of opposition have a formidable array of weapons at their disposal.

One's own ego will be applying constant pressure for one to cease and desist from one's efforts in this direction. The ego will fight a war of constant harassment which is designed to wear the individual down through a steady stream of: confusion, doubts, desires, pressures, ridicule, fears and anxieties.

The ego also will fight a rear guard action intended to resist and ambush every attempt by the individual to gain spiritual strength, commitment, and focus on the path. For example, one may discover, courtesy of one's ego, many, seemingly plausible excuses for why one's time and energy should be devoted to non-spiritual activities.

Alternatively, one just may feel too tired at the moment to observe the requirements or discipline or duties of the path. "Tomorrow, tomorrow", whispers the ego. This chant has a pleasant, mellow, relaxing quality to it.

In addition to the campaign of the ego, there will be substantial opposition from the world. The world has great need of, but no use for, sincere mystics or spiritually inclined individuals.

The world is a bordello of sensual delights. The world is a playing field in which all sides are vying for power and control according to a set of rules that would make Australian no-rules football look excessively authoritarian. The world is a cesspool of greed, malice and selfishness which generates an odor that, by comparison, would make the stench of manure a welcome change. The world is a gigantic mirror being polished by the mineral oil of self-adoration. The world is a killing field whose

executioners are equal-opportunity haters of considerable enthusiasm.

One could go on at great length in the foregoing way. However, enough has been said to give the drift of things vis-a-vis the condition of the worldly perspective.

The bottom line is this. The world stands for a state of mind and heart from which qualities such as decency, compassion, integrity, faith, honesty, love and fairness have been exorcized. As such, the worldly orientation tends to consider the ideas of spirituality or mysticism to be either stupid or obscene or obscenely stupid.

Some people of the worldly persuasion are aggressively hostile to spirituality and mysticism. Some people in the worldly camp have impeccable manners and would never dream of being rude to people whom they believe to be fools.

Some people who are inclined to the worldly way of things are supremely indifferent to, if not bored by, mystical and spiritual pursuits. Some proponents of the worldly orientation are amused, in a slightly contemptuous way, by any talk of spirituality or mysticism. Some of the worldly people are just totally mystified why anyone could find mysticism and spirituality of any interest or value, although they are prepared to accept everyone's right to spend time as one chooses.

Unfortunately, we are all contaminated, to varying degrees, by worldly forces. The aforementioned hostility, indifference, bemusement, contempt, and perplexity exists within us in a variety of guises. Because we are citizens of the world, our egos have a long-standing exchange program with a spectrum of worldly forces.

To swim against the numerous, raging, ugly currents of the world and the ego requires a lot of courage. To fight against the terrorist tactics of the world and the ego cannot be done except with courage. To experience the dark night of the soul created by the dance of the ego and the world takes courage.

To face the unknown and not run away demands courage. To be willing to leave what is familiar and comfortable, while journeying through the unfamiliar and, often, uncomfortable terrain of the mystical path, presupposes courage.

To place trust in one's spiritual guide, is an act of courage. To become committed to the mammoth task of reclamation involved in the spiritual reconstruction of one's life is a pure act of courage.

As if the world and the ego were not bad enough antagonists with which to have to contend, one also must deal with the demands of the rational mind. This poses an extremely complicated problem since the rational mind is what we usually rely on to evaluate experience and make judgments.

Most of us tend to believe rather strongly that if an evaluation or judgment is not rooted in rational analysis, then, we are being irrational. To speak of non-rational modalities of understanding appears somewhat of an oxymoron—at least, this is the conclusion of the rational mind.

To ask the ears to understand the way of the eyes sounds unreasonable. To expect the nose to have insight into the world of proprioception is disorienting to our rational sensibilities.

After all, ears and eyes are different structures entailing different processes and functions. Similarly, olfactory phenomena are quite different from the phenomena dealt with by sensors dealing with the orientation of muscles, tendons and joints.

Nonetheless, the rational mind believes it has the capacity to understand the ways of the heart and spirit. This is so despite the fact that Sufi masters have confirmed, and are agreed, that the latter phenomena are entirely different from, in structure, function and process, the workings of rationality. Like many other aspects of human existence, the rational dimension is presumptuous in the manner in which it seeks to extend its sphere of influence beyond its limits of effectiveness and appropriateness.

When one is taking an intelligence test, if one should try to force large, round pegs into small, square holes, this is taken as a sign of diminished capacity. How ironic that the rationality which conceived of such a test should insist on forcing the large, round pegs of spirituality and mysticism into the small, square holes of rationality.

The eye cannot see beyond its capabilities. The ear cannot hear beyond its capabilities. The nose cannot smell beyond its capabilities. The mind cannot understand beyond its capabilities.

There is, as the rational mind will be quick to point out, a major difference between, on the one hand, the nose, eye and ear, and, on the other hand, the mind. More specifically, in the former case, we have a fairly good idea of what the limitations are in each sensory modality. However, in the case of the mind, we have not yet, for the most part, discovered what the limitations of the mind are in terms of discovery, creativity and invention.

Some rational minds believe the sky, so to speak, is the limit. Effectively, this suggests there is no limit, given sufficient time and funding, to the rational mind's capacity to penetrate the secrets of the universe.

Extrapolating from ignorance does not seem a rational thing to do. Since we have no firm idea of what, in essence, rationality is or what makes it possible, we really have no idea of what the parameters of this capacity are.

Nevertheless, against reason, the rational mind is adamant it should have the final say in all matters of evaluation, judgment and understanding. The rational mind will take extreme umbrage with anyone who disagrees with its pronouncement in this regard.

The rational mind will inundate and intimidate one with formulae, tables, equations, statistics, mathematical functions, diagrams, experiments, research, debates, symposia, forums, journal articles, and so on proving that the rational mind is right and everything else is wrong. The rational mind will cajole, badger, ridicule, boast and flutter its big blues at one to convince the individual of the errors of his or her ways with respect to issues of non-rational modalities of understanding.

Sometimes, rational minds, upon reflection, may assert something of the following sort. We accept the possibility there may be different modalities of knowing. Nonetheless, the rational mind will suggest, directly or indirectly, that priority and preference should be given to rationality in the analyzing, evaluating, judging and understanding of most matters.

Sometimes, in order to bolster this claim of priority, the rational mind will remind us of what has been done for the world through rationality. Looking at the world and its history, one might wonder if such "proof" cannot as easily be used against rationality as it can be used in its defense.

To confront the rational mind, with all its eloquent oratory, is an act of courage. To stand firm in one's search for the reality of the unseen, despite



the impressive, dazzling feats of logic, science, philosophy and mathematics, is to have courage. To be willing to walk, alone if necessary, against the bitter winds of outraged reason, is to show courage.

Reason rails against the modes of understanding of the heart and the spirit. The tirade comes not only from without, it comes from within. Take courage.



## **Chapter 14**

### **Idols**

Normally speaking, when the term "idol" is used, we tend to think of naturally occurring objects or crafted artifacts. Furthermore, in order to 'qualify' as an idol, such objects and/or artifacts should be treated by the idol worshipers as gods or goddesses to which the individual directs his or her worship, praise, and supplication.

From the perspective of practitioners of the Sufi path, the worship of idols constitutes a fundamental spiritual error. The nature of the error may vary from case to case.

For example, idol worship often involves a confusion of a surface manifestation with the Source and Creator of that manifestation. The surface manifestation may be a sign, in some sense, of the presence of Divinity, for nothing can exist without having a relationship with Divinity. However, the surface manifestation is just that—a manifestation. It is not in essence the Essence of Divinity.

A second kind of error often surrounding idol worship is the following. The infinite, unlimited, lasting, uncreated, non-physical, incorruptible and formless nature of Divinity is collapsed and reduced to the finite, limited, ephemeral, created, physical, and corruptible concrete form of an idol of whatever description.

Thirdly, idol worship tends to impose a purely conceptual or theoretical network of meanings onto the nature of Divinity. This network of meanings or interpretations distorts and obscures the true reality of God's presence. As a result, people are led not to God, but away from Divinity, although they may believe this is not the case.

Fourthly, idol worship involves an ascribing of partners to God. In effect, the idol worshiper has isolated some particular form of manifestation from the underlying unity of Divinity. In addition, the idol worshiper claims such an aspect has, in and of itself, the capacity to help or hurt us.

The Sufi masters indicate only God has the ability to affect us. Yet, God may choose different modalities of Divine Names and Attributes to bring about such effects.

The foregoing four characteristics of idol worship have extensive ramifications concerning the way many of us live our lives. In fact, according to Sufi masters, idol worship may be far more pervasive, entrenched and insidiously entangled in our lives than we might like to think is the case.

Idols need not be restricted to naturally occurring objects such as the Sun, the moon, fire, water, and so on. Moreover, idols may not just be a matter of some sort of, say, stone artifact which has been fashioned by human hands.

Our desires, opinions, ideas, values, and beliefs can be idols to which we bow down in adulation and worship. The pursuit of physical pleasure also can constitute an idol, as can the pursuit of power, status, fame, money, material possessions, and fashion.

Political systems, ideologies, science, philosophy, literature, art and culture can constitute idols. The raising of athletic, political, business, artistic, scientific or academic figures to positions of praise, is to forget Who is the One really responsible for whatever good or benefit may be coming through a given locus of manifestation.

Even religion and mysticism can become nothing more than idol systems. Heaven, spiritual states, guides, mystical insights, Divine gifts, gnosis and teachings can all be calcified into idols to be worshiped, praised and loved in and of themselves, and quite independently of God.

To be pre-occupied with, focused on, striving for, committed to, or desirous of other than the pleasure of God, is to be engaged in a form of idol worship. Consequently, if one worships God out of a fear of hell or a desire for paradise, one may be engaged in idol worship.

Alternatively, if one worships God out of a desire for miraculous favors or strange experiences or spiritual elevation or mystical unveilings, then one is pursuing a form of idol worship. Moreover, if one worships God out of a desire for worldly success of whatever kind, then one is caught up in a form of idol worship.

The common thread running through all of these potential forms of idol worship is the way in which loving, serving, and obeying God does not play the central role in one's intentions and motivations. God really has been reduced to being a means to an end which serves the desires of the

ego. The individual is worshipping God for what God is going to do for him or her.

In the foregoing circumstances, the individual actually is bowing down only to his or her own concept of God. The worship and praise are all directed toward the projections of the false self.

We have a tendency to interpret the spiritual activities of our lives as due to our doing and causing and accomplishing and achieving. Prayers, for example, are said, and our ego immediately exercises its inclination to appropriate these actions as its own.

Prayers are given expression through being, consciousness, will, hearing, seeing and speech, none of which belong to us. These qualities are manifestations of various Names and Attributes of God.

In claiming prayers as our own, we are maintaining we are the cause of those prayers. Furthermore, we are contending our prayers are the reason why benefit comes to us in this world and/or the next life. In effect, in both instances we are ascribing partners to God.

According to the masters of the Sufi way, fasting, night vigils, prayers, seclusion, remembrance, association and so on, are of value only if they are rooted in an intentional framework seeking detachment from: the false self, the world, expectation, reward, and personal accomplishment. Indeed, one of the fundamental values of the aforementioned practices is that, God willing, they bring about such detachment if engaged with sincerity.

Spiritual practices of any kind, whether exoteric or esoteric, are of essential value only if they are expressions of a desire for complete submission to, and love of, God, as ends in themselves. In fact, the essential value of spiritual practice, of whatever kind, is to help us realize what is involved in submitting ourselves to, and having love for, God to the full extent of our spiritual capacity.

If our intentions are shaped and colored by the false self, then we run a serious risk of sliding into idol worship of one description or another. Unfortunately, the hydra-like properties of the ego are such that very few, if any, of our intentions are not being seduced toward the slippery slope which leads to idol worship. Only the mercy of God prevents this from happening.



## **Chapter 15**

### **Capacity**

From the perspective of the Sufi path, every human being has a unique spiritual capacity. However, not every capacity necessarily will be realized to its full extent, or even in part.

Life is the opportunity provided by God to become busy with doing the things required for bringing one's essential capacity on line. Whether or not we take advantage of the chance extended to us, is a matter of choice and an exercise in free will.

Spirituality is only one of the potentials we have been given. We each have been outfitted, so to speak, with other non-spiritual capacities. For example, the capacity for life itself is expressed through our biological nature. Our bodies, including the brain, have been equipped with sensory and locomotor modalities. In addition, we have, in varying degrees: intellectual abilities; creative capacities; a spectrum of emotional possibilities; talents of one sort or another and a capacity for language.

The Sufi masters also sometimes talk of a wide variety of other powers and capabilities which are, under the right circumstances, available to human beings. These capacities range from: the ability to dream, to various kinds of so-called psychic and occult powers.

Many of these latter kinds of capacity are so infrequently accessed or encountered in any direct way, they are considered to be fictional in nature by most of us. Nonetheless, although such abilities are not really part of, nor pertinent to, the Sufi path, nonetheless, the masters of the way do confirm their existence.

Our numerous capacities generate a multiplicity of experiential possibilities, each of which is conducive to extended exploration. In fact, as human beings, we have such a diverse set of capabilities, potentials, capacities, and powers available to us, we easily become confused about, or distracted from, the purpose of life.

According to the Sufi masters, even if we succeed in developing a whole slew of our many abilities, yet, ignore our spiritual possibilities, we will have failed in life's primary mission. On the other hand, if we sincerely attempt to realize our spiritual capacity, but fail in relation to some of the other capacities, we, nevertheless, will have chosen the right priorities in life as far as the Sufi path is concerned.

To be sure, there are individuals who, by the grace of God, realize their spiritual capacity and, as well, realize one or more other capabilities. These people may be great musicians or artists or poets or leaders and, yet, not have neglected their spiritual dimension.

The foregoing sorts of people tend to be relatively rare. They certainly are individuals of immense ability and good fortune.

They are not necessarily the standard by which most of the rest of us ought to gauge our lives. We can appreciate such lives without either feeling compelled to emulate them or feeling one's life is somehow impoverished for not having been as accomplished as them in various ways.

The primary focus should be on realizing our essential, spiritual capacity. Indeed, according to the Sufi masters, if one goes about the task and challenge of spiritual realization properly, one, generally, will have little interest in, or inclination toward, doing anything else—except in some minimally necessary manner that still will permit justice to be done to other facets of one's life.

When one becomes absorbed in God, everything else becomes arranged and organized as a function of that absorption. Priorities are set, and attention is given, in relation to how possibilities and activities can be accommodated to, or become expressions of, one's spiritual orientation.

God may inspire us to do great things. Nevertheless, this is God's will acting on us for Divine purposes. For us, on our own, to seek to do great things above and beyond the business of realizing one's spiritual capacity is a sign of the presence of ego. Many of us sometimes mistake the call of the ego for the call of God.

God has a part waiting for us in the Divine passion play. Whether we opt for the role of the fool who squanders his or her spiritual potential, or we strive for the part of the servant of God who struggles to realize her or his essential spiritual capacity, will make no difference to the beauty and majesty of the play.

In either case, we will bring our own, inimitable style to the existential stage. In success or failure, our contribution will be unique.

Either kind of uniqueness will fit equally well into the unfolding of the play. Our choices will neither improve nor diminish the quality of the production or staging process.



There is room for heroines and heroes. However, villains and villainesses are welcome as well. If anything, the presence of antagonistic forces merely heightens the dramatic tension of the whole affair.

In one sense, the choice of roles is entirely up to us. On the other hand, there are a variety of twists, turns and mysteries involved in the plot line.

Sometimes we can have our heart set on playing the bad guy and, suddenly, our world is turned upside down and we start acting, much to our disgust, the part of the hero or heroine. At other times we may be quite preoccupied with being on the side of right and good only to find ourselves falling head first into the underside of life.

Some of these role reversals are temporary. Some of them are permanent. In all cases, they are reflections of capacities within us, and we all wonder where we will end up when the music stops and the house lights are turned on.

We have a unique potential to know God and to experience Divinity. We each have a unique capacity to give expression to the Names and Attributes of God.

Sufi masters maintain that human beings, alone in all of creation, have the capacity to reflect all the Names and Attributes of God. Other aspects of creation do reflect various dimensions of the Names and Attributes of God according to their capacity, but none of the rest of creation has the potential given to human beings.

As indicated previously, there are differences in spiritual capacity among human beings. However, each of these capacities, if realized, can reflect the full, infinite spectrum of Divine Names and Attributes. Each has the potential to do so in a unique fashion.

Because spiritual capacities are unique, there really is no basis for comparison. All jewels have their own beauty and appeal. Each jewel brings something that cannot be offered by any other jewel.

The only ground for comparison lies within the individual. The sole criterion for such comparison is what a person has been able to actualize in the way of spiritual realization, as measured against that individual's essential spiritual capacity. The degree of success or failure in life is a function of the status of the ratio of these two factors.



## **Chapter 16**

### **Forgiveness**

There are many times when we forgive with our words but not with our hearts. There are times when we forgive in order to move on with our lives, but part of us is still stuck in the past.

We frequently hear the declaration: "I can forgive, but I won't forget". According to practitioners of the Sufi path, if one can't forget, one hasn't forgiven.

The truth of the Sufi perspective is often borne out in the experience of many of us. For example, we have an argument with our spouse or children or parents or friends or work mates. Suddenly, we are on a play-by-play excursion of mutual history, with color commentary. Details of incidents are dredged up which a person with total recall would find a challenge to remember.

The emotions of the moment have tapped into, and are being fed, by some deep, sub-surface reservoir of hurt. At the same time, the ego is always looking for an edge in situations. Consequently, the ego will resort to playing the memory card in order to try to gain the tactical high ground.

We tend to remember those things which, for whatever reason, have personal significance to us. One of the reasons why we forget events, or aspects of those events, is because they are deemed to be trivial or unimportant in nature. We can get along without them. We tend to remember those things for which we believe we will have some later use.

There may be a variety of reasons why we feel retaining memories of hurtful life experiences is of value to us. One possibility why we remember such events is to help us to avoid, or defend against, a repetition of the pain in the future.

When the structural characters of current events begin to have a resonance with past memories involving pain, warning flags go up. The past is revisited, and we modulate our actions to reflect, in an advantageous way, our past experience. This sort of process is at the heart of all learning.

Another possibility why we remember painful events is as a prelude to payback time. We wait. We plan. We watch. We pounce. We get satisfaction, or, at least, our egos do.

As some people say: "What goes around comes around". Payback often has a way of going and coming in cycles with the only difference being the identity of whom is the payer and payee on any given occasion.

Sometimes, in a very efficient but untidy manner, we can watch this cycle spinning its wheels before our very eyes. We accomplish this by taking turns with our current protagonist. First, we are on the business end of payback, and, then, it is time for us to make our contribution to civilization.

Another possibility concerning why we hold on to painful incidents from our lives is so we can visit, from time to time, the museum of hurt. Our egos seem to gain some sort of perverse comfort from such field trips.

For example, if we are feeling sorry for ourselves, the thought may come to us: Why don't we take a trip to the museum of hurt and run through our cavalcade of painful memories. Perhaps, we just are strolling down memory lane and happen to pass the museum on our way.

Something catches our attention in the window, and we go in to investigate. We often end up staying longer than originally intended.

In either case, we seem to derive strange sorts of reassurance and pleasure from doing this. There may be a variety of sources from which such pleasure and reassurance are derived.

Some of us do this in order to reconfirm our perceived identity as victims of some kind. Some of us make this journey because we feel it lends justification to our feelings of anger, envy, jealousy or hatred.

Some of us make this visit as a form of self-punishment. We consider ourselves to be losers, and, as a result, we go to the museum, look at its painful memories and say: "Only a loser could own a collection of hurt and sadness like this". We get satisfaction from this because, at least in this judgment of ourselves, we are right about something, such as it is.

We don't permit ourselves to let go of the past. Some of the reasons for not doing so are perfectly legitimate. Some of our reasons are

merely rationalizations of the ego to camouflage its ploys and stratagems.

There are, at least, two species of: forgiving but not forgetting. One concerns the objective fact of a given event having taken place and, therefore, the reality of which cannot be denied.

Such an event is now part of history. Whatever transpired occurred in a particular way at a specific time and place, within a certain context, involving various individuals.

One is no longer emotionally tied to this memory. One feels no sense of hurt from it. There is nothing in it for which one believes forgiveness of someone is any longer an issue. It no longer has a hallowed spot in one's museum of hurt. In fact, the memory is no longer even in the archives of that museum.

However, one was a witness to, and participant in, that event. The main theme(s) of the event, along with varying degrees of detail, have been extended a permanent visa in long-term memory. Initially, we may have had some reason for storing it, or it may be just one of those experiences which is stored in memory whether we like it or not.

Nonetheless, we rarely, if ever, think about the event. Moreover, it plays no part in adversely affecting, or undermining, or tainting our current relationships with those involved in the event. It is not a source of tension or conflict which permeates a relationship like some invisible, noxious gas.

There is another species of: forgiving but not forgetting, which is quite different from the foregoing. This form spawns subcutaneous doubt, suspicion, distrust, resentment, and antagonism. This species of "forgiving" negatively: colors, shapes and orients practically everything we do with the individual whom we supposedly have forgiven.

This kind of "forgiveness" is constantly bracing itself for history to be repeated. It is ever vigilant for the detection of violations of the cease fire agreement.

This sort of "forgiveness" cannot divest itself of the past. The pain is still alive and on display in the museum of hurt.

We sometimes confuse the latter form of forgiveness with the former species of forgiveness. Sometimes we even may half-convince ourselves we

no longer harbor any hurt feelings and have let go of our pain. Time will tell.

One might refer to the two varieties of forgiving as: resolved and unresolved forgiveness. In unresolved forgiveness, matters are being orchestrated by the ego.

The ego has a vested interest in keeping the hurt active. This hurt will be used as currency by the ego to subsidize one or more of its attempts to exploit subsequent situations for tactical advantage or in order to exact revenge.

For example, we claim to have forgiven someone. We later become involved in some sort of difficulty with that person and, immediately, the mind is flooded with the images and scenes of past hurt. The energy and feelings associated with these memories are then diverted to underwrite the construction of barriers of ill-will, suspicion and so on in the current situation.

In resolved forgiveness, each situation is considered on its merits, independently from whatever may have happened previously. If one has forgiven someone in a fully resolved manner, one is not flooded with memories of past indiscretions by the same person with whom one currently is having problems.

One is focused on what is happening now, not on what happened then. One is not pre-judging the situation in the colored light of the past.

Sometimes we forgive others, not because those people have done anything to us which requires forgiveness on our part, but as a kind of proof to ourselves that we are right and they are wrong. In such cases, we forgive in order to reinforce our ego's image of itself as occupying, in all situations, the moral high ground.

The thinking, such as it is, goes something like the following. Only a person who has been wronged in some way has cause to forgive. I am forgiving someone. Therefore, I must have been wronged in some way.

In reality, this tactic is a preemptive strike by the ego to divert attention away from its own culpability in the matters at hand. If I forgive you before you forgive me, then, from the perspective of the ego, this is tantamount to saying, using the 'logic' of the previous paragraph, that you were the transgressor in this situation, not me.

Our egos forgive to show a moral superiority to others it doesn't possess. Our egos forgive to demonstrate qualities of tolerance and magnanimity of which it is bereft.

There are occasions when our egos forgive to place others in our debt. At the right time, we present the invoice for our original forgiveness and demand payment.

On other occasions, our egos forgive because, at least for the present time, not forgiving is getting in the way of something else we want. We start our current negotiations with an act of forgiveness (a good will gesture as it were) and, then, proceed on to the main items on our agenda.

Forgiveness can be good for the business of the ego. Besides, if things don't work out, we always can retract our forgiveness, claiming, self-righteously, that the other person was negotiating in bad faith, and, therefore, didn't really deserve our forgiveness after all.

The practitioners of the Sufi path seek to actualize resolved forgiveness. Indeed, the Sufi masters are living exemplars of all that resolved forgiveness involves.

When Sufi shaykhs have been wronged and forgive those who have transgressed against them, then, God willing, the incident is never mentioned again, either externally or internally. The slate is wiped clean, as if nothing ever had appeared there. There is not even the minutest lingering chalk dust of resentment or irritation.

In this respect, the Sufi master is merely reflecting the quality of Divinity which proceeds in the same manner with respect to transgressions. In fact, God is the One who makes resolved forgiveness on the human level possible.

To truly forgive, in a resolved fashion, is Divinity in action. However, according to the practitioners of the Sufi path, we are under an obligation to strive for resolved forgiveness until it comes as a gift from God.

We are transgressing against God all the time. God is quite prepared to extend forgiveness to us in the fully resolved sense.

The spiritual etiquette of the situation requires we ask, in an official manner, through prayers of petition, for such forgiveness. This spiritual etiquette further requires that we make a sincere undertaking to God to not commit the transgression again.

Committing oneself to such an undertaking, does not guarantee we will not make the same mistake in the future. Yet, if we do falter, God is prepared to forgive us again and again.

However, we cannot take God's forgiveness as a license. There are limits beyond which we transgress at our peril. Indeed, continuing to transgress in the same way, is a sign our repentance was not sincere when we sought God's forgiveness and claimed we would never again commit such transgressions.

Just as there is unresolved forgiveness, so too there is unresolved repentance. Unresolved repentance is when forgiveness has been uttered by our mouths, but the desire for transgression remains in our hearts.

Sometimes, even when we have not realized our mistake and have not asked for forgiveness, God forgives us. God is so forgiving that the flimsiest of excuses often are offered by God on our behalf as a reason for forgiving us.

The Sufi masters reflect this Divine quality as well. They are constantly seeking forgiveness from God for our transgressions, both known and unknown, while making excuses on our behalf for why we should not be taken to task by God for our mistakes.

To seek to realize resolved forgiveness in our lives is an opportunity for spiritual growth. God orchestrates situations so we will be wronged by others and be faced with the struggle of whether or not to forgive sincerely and fully.

The more we are, by God's grace, able to struggle toward becoming disentangled from the problems surrounding and permeating unresolved forgiveness, the greater is the likelihood that, God willing, spiritual benefit will accrue to us. The more we are able, with God's help, to make resolved forgiveness a stable part of our way of interacting with other people, the better will things be for everyone involved.

Unresolved and resolved forgiveness both are inherently contagious. When we interact with other people through the agenda of unresolved forgiveness, there is a very strong tendency for the tension, conflict, antagonism, and suspicions which are part and parcel of that condition to spread to others with whom we interact.

On the other hand, when we interact with others through the quality of resolved forgiveness, there is a strong set of forces present which help induce others to reciprocate in kind. For example, when we



encounter someone who treats us with genuine, sincere resolved forgiveness in relation to our transgressions against them, we begin to feel our grievances are trivial and petty and not worthy things to hold on to. Consequently, once we taste the experience of being forgiven in this complete manner, we often have a desire to extend this same manner of treatment to others.

The Prophets first contracted this syndrome through their dealings with God. Saints picked it up from the Prophets. Present-day Sufi masters are trying their best to infect us, God willing, with this spirit of resolved forgiveness.



## **Chapter 17**

### **Obedience**

One of the major stumbling blocks on the Sufi path revolves around the issue of obedience. Many people who have an interest in mysticism frequently are of the opinion there is a way to realize one's essential capacity and true identity without having to go through the door of obedience. Sufi masters indicate such a perspective is far from the truth. Indeed, one either will come to amicable terms with the fact obedience is an inherent dimension of the mystical path, or one eventually will part company with the path. There is no third alternative.

We all want to be captain of our own ship. However, we do not realize we are only lowly cabin attendants who are lost in a daydream.

We pretend we are well versed in the rigors of the life of commanding a vessel at sea. In reality, we have neither the training nor the experience to cope with what is to come.

We speak bravely about our ability to weather storms at sea. Unfortunately, we know nothing about: how to arrange ballast in preparation for a storm; or, how to make use of a ship's rigging during a storm; or, how to repair tattered and torn sails after a storm.

We are drunk with our own sense of self-importance and cleverness as would-be captains of the ocean. Yet, in our drunkenness, we are derelict in performing all of the on-board duties of care which a real captain must observe.

We cannot distinguish between illusion and reality. Nonetheless, we believe we are competent to command.

Our navigational equipment is faulty and unreliable. Our vessel is without a rudder.

Not only do we not know where we are, we don't know where we are going. Moreover, even if we knew precisely where we wanted to go, we would have no way of steering clear of the dangers along the way.

We are caught up in our delusions of finding a spiritual Northwest Passage. We are willing to sacrifice almost everything in this venture except our delusions.

We believe we are being courageous. However, we cannot face the truth about the foolish ways in which we are conducting ship's affairs.

We are willing to be obedient to our ignorance and darkness, even if this costs us our spiritual lives. On the other hand, we are not willing to be obedient to knowledge and light, even if these will redeem our lives.

We take guides on board in order to help us through uncharted territory. We, then, proceed to reject the guidance given at almost every turn. After all, we know better, don't we?

We believe our individualistic style of command brings us integrity and prestige. In reality, all our independence does is to transform us into spiritual buffoons of the sea.

Before one is fit to take command of a ship, one must be able to know how to take commands. Moreover, one must come to understand and appreciate why such commands exist.

Anyone can be rebellious, defiant, querulous, uncooperative, selfish, and intransigent. These qualities require no training or intelligence whatsoever.

On the other hand, not everyone is prepared to go through the training, or exercise the intelligence, required to develop the patience, humility, strength, love and wisdom which comes through obedience.

On the Sufi path, obedience is never really about obedience taken as an end in itself. Obedience always is a means to something else of a transcendent nature.

For example, to be a true servant of God is to be obedient to the will of God. Nevertheless, doing something out of love, friendship and choice, as would be the case with a true servant of God, is not, in essence, an issue of obedience.

On the Sufi path, obedience is necessary. However, the necessity for obedience is dictated not by our essential nature, but by the existence of our ego or false self which stands opposed to all forms of obedience that are not self-serving.

Before we can be in a spiritual position to realize, God willing, our true self and essential capacity, the resistance of the ego first must be neutralized. The only way in which this can happen is for the ego to become obedient.

As long as the ego exists in its unrepentant form, progress cannot be made on the mystical path. Once the ego has become obedient through

repenting of its normal inclinations, the way is cleared, God willing, for spiritual development.

Many people are enamored with Sufi stories. They enjoy the humor, psychology, practicality, morality, and multi-layered character of these tales.

Many people also are intrigued with verbal or written discussions concerning the metaphysical dimensions of the Sufi path. Through these discussions, people often feel they are coming into contact with some basic truths about different realms, dimensions and levels of reality.

In addition, many people like to hang out with Sufi masters. Such people often find a degree of peace and happiness in the presence of these spiritual guides. Moreover, these people may hope to be recipients of some sort of spiritual grace while with the shaykh.

Nonetheless, when matters of spiritual obedience arise, many of these same people who, previously, were so enamored, intrigued and at peace with the Sufi path, suddenly become very pre-occupied with the affairs of the world. Everything assumes more importance than the requirements of Sufi discipline.

People who respond in this fashion are like someone who is given an opportunity to gain free and complete access to all of the gold of Fort Knox and, yet, such a person is content with stealing a few pieces of embossed stationery. They value the relatively worthless while ignoring the true treasures that are available.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, no matter what choices one makes in life, one will not be able to escape the issue of obedience. We will be obedient to our false self, or we will be obedient to the world, or we will be obedient to satanic forces, or we will be obedient to God.

Only the last form of obedience is capable of leading one to true sovereignty and freedom. This is so, say Sufi masters, because we never can be free to be our essential selves until everything which prevents us from being ourselves no longer impedes us.

Our false self, the world and satanic forces will never be interested in permitting us to be our essential self. They always will seek to keep us obedient to their rule.

On the other hand, through Divine compassion and mercy, obedience is transformed into intimate friendship and love. Between the lover and the beloved, there is no question of obedience since they reflect one another on all issues and in all matters.

The spiritually realized individual is completely free to give expression to the essential self in whatever way spiritual capacity permits. At the same time, nothing which is manifested through the true self would ever be discordant with Divine will.

Having said the foregoing, one still must exercise caution with respect to the identity of the spiritual guide with whom one is considering becoming associated. Obedience to a false guide will only lead to disaster.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Mureed**

On the Sufi path there is the seeker (mureed), and there is the sought (murad). Ostensibly, we might suppose we are the seekers and God is the sought, but things are not always what they seem to be.

When a person becomes interested in pursuing the mystical path, the individual thinks this idea and interest has come from herself or himself. Perhaps, the individual had been reading an article or book on mysticism which the person came across in some manner or other. Maybe, the individual ran into somebody at school or at work who was interested in mysticism. Possibly, the person heard about a public lecture on mysticism and decided to go.

There are many ways to rationally reconstruct events to have them make sense to us after the fact. Most of the time, all of the little things which had to happen in order to get us to the point where we, for example, saw an article, or heard an announcement about a lecture, or came into contact with a given individual are lost in the mists of forgotten memory.

We do choose, we do have free will, but we also have destiny. Events surrounding our choices are orchestrated.

The choices we, in reality, have are not necessarily as many as we might like to think is the case. We choose events, but events choose us as well. Sometimes, the only choice we may have is: (a) to acquiesce, to varying degrees, to what is transpiring; or, (b) to try resist, in some way, the way things are unfolding. Indeed, our options even may be limited merely to picking the degree of acquiescence or resistance to events which we cannot avoid.

In considering a course of action, many ideas may flutter into, and out of, consciousness. We assume these ideas are generated by us, but we have no conclusive etiology of the origin of ideas.

Modern neurophysiology has brought forth a great deal of evidence linking impaired cognitive functioning with damage to specific brain sites. Nonetheless, no one, neurophysiologists included, has the foggiest notion of how, or if, neural impulses or bioelectric circuitry or neurotransmitters, working individually or in tandem, produce ideas or consciousness or reasoning.

One can show that by tinkering with the tubes and circuit boards of a television set, one can disrupt the functioning of the set in precise ways. Yet, this does not prove the images and sounds made possible by the set originate from within that set. We all know the signals originate elsewhere and are transmitted through the air or through cables to the television.

The ideas which arise in our consciousness are not necessarily our own. They may have many different sources, including spiritual ones.

Sufi masters indicate God is, in a sense, transmitting signals to us all the time. Some of these "messages" are in the form of external events. Some of these "signals" come through our bodies, or our minds, or our emotions or our hearts.

Divinity is calling out to us in diverse ways. From the moment we come into this world, God is trying to get our attention.

"Hello, Hello! Is anybody at home?" More often than not, we are out to lunch or on holiday.

When something finally clicks in us, and we become interested in religion or spirituality or mysticism, we tend to want to take credit for what is happening. We speak in terms of our search and our seeking.

In reality, we have been the sought. God has been the seeker.

Why would God seek us? God knows the spiritual potential which is in us. After all, that potential was created and put there by Divinity.

God, out of pure love, compassion, generosity, and kindness, wishes to share something of Divinity with us. God has been seeking us out to apprise us of what is possible.

In effect, God is seeking out human beings in, at least, two senses. First, God is seeking us out in our unredeemed condition of spiritual dissipation. God is calling on us to leave our fallen state of ignorance, darkness and density and to return to the knowledge, light and subtlety of Divinity.

Secondly, God is seeking out the unique, essential, spiritual capacity within us. Only when this capacity is realized, do we become fully human. Only when this capacity becomes active do we fulfill the purpose of our potential.



If we willingly respond to the Divine overture to return to God in a state of spiritual redemption, this is commendable. However, if we willingly respond to God's entreaties and struggle to realize our unique, essential potential this is best.

The Sufi masters take this seeking of us, the sought, by God, the seeker, one step further. According to them, human beings are in essence Divine, although we are not Divinity in Essence.

There is both immanence and transcendence in God's relationship with human beings. God is closer to us than life itself. Yet, God also is entirely independent of us.

God's closeness or imminence to us is expressed through the Divine character of the potential inherent in our essential spiritual nature. At the same time, God's transcendence is expressed through the distinction drawn between us, even in our essential nature, and the Essence of God. Human beings always remain human, even in redeemed and fully realized forms of spirituality.

Our capacity to know God is limited by our spiritual capacity. We only know of God what Divinity permits.

When God seeks us in order to induce us to seek Divinity, God is calling us to realize our essential capacity and true identity which has Divinity inherent in it. When we respond to God's call, we take the role of seeker, and God becomes the sought.

Nonetheless, God becomes the sought in a very special sense. God is being sought in the forms of manifestation which give expression to our unique capacities and essential identity. Consequently, we are seeking the Divine within.

In effect, we are seeking our own true selves. Ultimately, God is the seeker, and God is the sought. However, in a reflected sense, we also are the seeker and the sought. It is all a matter of perspective.

To be a true seeker or mureed, one has to understand one's responsibilities as a potential murad or 'object' which is sought by God. That which Divinity is seeking within us is, as indicated above, the true self.

If we do not seek to realize our essential capacity, we will not be able to worship, love and serve God in accordance with our spiritual potential. As a result, we will have missed our essential calling in life. We will have failed in

our fiduciary responsibilities in relation to the potential which God has entrusted into our care when we were, in a sense, given existence.

We must seek our essential uniqueness because this is what God is seeking from us. If, by the grace of God, we realize our true self, then, according to Sufi masters, we will come to understand that the seeker and the sought are different manifestations of one and the same reality.

The relationship between the initiate and the spiritual guide reflects all of the foregoing. More specifically, if God wishes, an initiate comes to realize, in time, that the true self of the shaykh is God's way of inducing the initiate to seek his or her own essential self.

One first comes into "contact" with one's own essential self through the reflection provided by the true self of the shaykh. By becoming introduced to our true selves through association with the true self of the shaykh, one comes face to face, in reflected form, with Divine reality

Everything which the shaykh does with respect to the initiate is a manifestation of God's seeking to induce the initiate to realize one truth—namely, the essential capacity of the individual. This is what actually is being sought—by God, and, therefore, by implication, also by the spiritual guide and the initiate.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Heedlessness**

Heedlessness is a quality of our spiritual darkness. To be heedless, is to be a servant of the ego.

Heedlessness is to prefer our own ideas to Divine meanings. Heedlessness is to favor our own opinions over the teachings of the Prophets, saints and spiritual guides.

To be heedless, is a clear sign of our deep addiction to our false self. To be heedless, is to be preoccupied with the whims and fantasies of the ego.

Heedlessness entails denying the rights which God has over us. Heedlessness involves denying the rights which our families and neighbors and all of creation have over us.

To be heedless, we must reject the call of our spirit. To be heedless, we must abandon our hearts to the decay and corruption of our egos.

Heedlessness gives expression to criticism of God's creation. Heedlessness exists in our finding fault with God's way of handling and managing our affairs.

To fail to realize the purpose of existence is to be heedless. To continue to allow the activities of our passion and anger to transfix us is to be heedless.

Heedlessness blinds us to the signs of God. To be heedless, is to be mute in our praise of God.

To be heedless, is to not realize God is closer to us than life itself. Heedlessness means we do not understand our essence is rooted in Divinity.

To ignore the countless forms of kindness God extends to us every day, is to be heedless. To fail to cherish the spiritual opportunity which this life offers is to be heedless.

To fail to assume our responsibilities with respect to the care and protection of nature is to be heedless. To allow the soil of soul to remain fallow is to be heedless.

Heedlessness is to treat love as if it were a four letter word. Heedlessness is to be attracted to hostility, hatred and malice.

Heedlessness is to have lost access to our capacity to distinguish between the real and the illusory. To be heedless, is to savor the taste of worldly things.

To be heedless, is to be willing participants in the spread of the diseases of the ego. Heedlessness is to be inactive in helping the poor, the hungry and the homeless.

To believe we are independent of God is to be heedless. To prefer gratification to sacrifice is to be heedless.

Heedlessness consists in placing trust in ourselves rather than God. To be heedless, is to prostitute our spiritual potential.

To separate ourselves from Divine guidance is to be heedless. To go through life intoxicated with our own likes and dislikes, is to be heedless.

Heedlessness is to show inadequate respect for sacred ground. Heedlessness is to confuse our false self for our real self.

To be heedless, is to take license with God's forgiveness. To be heedless, is to seek worldly knowledge rather than gnosis.

Heedlessness is to believe we will not be held accountable for what we omit and commit in this life. Heedlessness is to waste our lives worshipping the idols of the ego.

To not understand the depth of our vulnerability to the forces within and without us is to be heedless. To believe we are awake when we are fast asleep is to be heedless.

To ridicule, and show contempt for, the servants of God is to be heedless. To take the world as a friend is to be heedless.

Heedlessness is to prefer rebellion over obedience in relation to God. Heedlessness is to betray one's essential identity.

To be caught up with the diversions of avocations rather than the work of our spiritual vocation, is to be heedless. To treat time as if it were a renewable resource is to be heedless.

To consider truth to be relative to one's point of view is to be heedless. To believe there are no absolutes is to be heedless.

Heedlessness is to object to the imposition of constraints on the activities of the ego. Heedlessness is to suppose we are the source of our rights and not God.

To be heedless, is to rest our hope on other than God. To be heedless, is to suppose that our successes are the direct result of our efforts.

To be indifferent to the misery and pain we cause others, is to be heedless. To believe God is not intimately aware of all that we do, is to be heedless.

To suppose the answers to the problems of life can be found in science, medicine, economics, psychology, politics, mathematics, theology, and/or philosophy, is to be heedless. To set about changing the world, before we transform ourselves, is to be heedless.

To mouth spiritual platitudes, without sincere commitment to implementing spiritual principles in our lives, is to be heedless. To be preoccupied with finding fault with others rather than ourselves is to be heedless.

To believe a life of spirituality can be gained without struggle is to be heedless. To assume one's struggles are sufficient for spiritual success is to be heedless.

To be heedless, is not to be immersed in the remembrance of God. To be heedless, is to consider our death to be far away.

To be heedless, is to assume anything can occur without permission of God. To be heedless, is to blame God for what we permit to come into our lives

Heedlessness is to believe we can realize Divinity in our lives while holding on to our false selves. Heedlessness is to be inattentive to the fact all things pass away.



## Chapter 20

### Equality

Inequalities seem to permeate every level of human existence. Only a little observation and reflection is required to confirm the seeming omnipresence of inequalities.

Intelligence is not distributed equally across humanity. There are huge discrepancies between, say, severely challenged Down's syndrome individuals and the intellectually gifted.

The chasm between the rich and poor appears to have existed since the beginning of recorded history. In between these two extremes there have been a fluctuating number of moderately rich and moderately poor people.

Any quality one cares to mention reflects this same inequality of distribution. Creativity, health, beauty, handsomeness, spirituality, talent, ambition, leadership, business sense, athletic ability, power, charisma, status, illness, fame, honesty, kindness, and so on, are all unequally distributed.

This is true within, as well as across, all racial, ethnic, and national groups. Moreover, it holds, as well, across history.

The distribution of most, perhaps all, of these qualities probably could be reflected fairly accurately by a bell-curve. In other words, there would be relatively few people on the low and high ends of a scale depicting the degree to which a person possessed a given quality. As one approached the median from either end of the scale, the numbers would gradually increase until they peaked at the median point.

Despite all of this inequality, Sufi masters maintain we are all equal before God. How does one reconcile the overwhelming evidence of inequality with the statement of Sufi masters concerning our equality in relation to God?

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, we each have a unique essential or spiritual capacity. This capacity refers to our potential for reflecting the Names and Attributes of Divinity. Consequently, no two individuals have the same reflective properties of spirituality.

Sufi masters indicate every modality of spiritual reflectivity is precious to God. God cherishes each capacity because each potential has some uniqueness about it.

Uniqueness does not fit a normal distribution. Indeed, God has equipped essential human capacity for maximum distributive dispersal. Nothing is ever repeated.

According to Sufi masters, the Divine will desires for all uniqueness to be manifested. Every instance of uniqueness displays, in reflected form, more and more of Divine beauty and majesty. Every modality of uniqueness brings into existence a potential for unique reflectivity which has not been displayed previously and which will not be displayed again.

No matter how beautiful a given expression of spiritual reflection may be, there are other potentials for reflection which have a dimension of uniqueness to them not found in the first potential. The reverse, of course, is also true.

We each have been brought into existence to bring to dynamic realization our respective unique capacities for spiritual reflection of the Divine Names and Attributes. Since our potentials are unique, different circumstances are necessary to activate them.

The package of qualities associated with each of us is not arbitrary, nor is it a matter of the luck of the draw. These packages of qualities have been assigned to us by God.

The assignment of these qualities is related to our essential spiritual capacity for reflecting Divine Names and Attributes in a unique fashion. More specifically, each package of qualities is uniquely designed to provide the individual to whom they have been assigned with the sort of experiential challenges, struggles and possibilities out of which essential capacity may be brought to mature fruition.

The inequalities inherent in the various quality packages are necessary so that the different capacities for uniqueness can develop. However, one must be careful not to misunderstand what is being said here.

There is often a difference between the quality package which God assigns to certain individuals and the quality package which people try to impose on those same individuals. The quality packages which people try to impose are shaped by ignorance, bias, injustice, evil and so on. These human generated quality packages are not, taken in and of themselves, conducive to the realization of our unique spiritual capacities. For example, if a government or ruler wanted to impose hunger, poverty, torture, danger, homelessness, and various forms of other abuse on a



given group of people, this "quality" package could generate many problems for individuals trying to realize their essential spiritual capacity.

At the same time, the attempted imposition of such human generated quality packages is part of the quality package which God has assigned to us. The attempted imposition of the human generated quality packages constitutes obstacles, challenges and injustice which we are being asked to struggle with and against.

Consequently, one is not being asked by God to endorse those processes involving the attempted imposition of human generated quality packages onto humanity. One is being asked to resist them but to do so in ways which will help one to realize one's essential spiritual capacity. Knowing how to accomplish this is very difficult.

The challenge each of us faces is to engage and embrace the quality package assigned to us by God in accordance with the manner in which God intended such packages to be used. Those packages, when properly understood and utilized, become the key to finding our way to realization of our essential spiritual capacity.

Among other things, the quality packages assigned to each of us by God involve a mixture of trials, tests, struggles, conflicts, and challenges. Those packages also contain whatever assets are necessary for the realization of our capacity for spiritual reflection.

The assets necessary for spiritual realization are not necessarily money, power, status, education, talent, creativity and so on. In fact, such qualities, more often than not, can be obstacles and trials with which one must struggle in order to overcome their potential for undermining one's quest for spiritual realization.

On the other hand, low-tech and low-capital qualities such as kindness, perseverance, simplicity, openness, sincerity, and so on, may be very important assets to have in one's quality package. What counts as a potential asset and what counts as a potential liability will vary from case to case ... according to what is necessary for a given person's spiritual realization.

Having something can be just as much a problem as not having something. Each of these conditions entails its own brand of difficulty. Each of these conditions contains its own potential for benefit and development.

We each are being given, by God, an equal opportunity, in the form of our present lives, to realize our unique, essential, spiritual capacity. Each of these unique capacities has a dimension which renders them equally important to God as far as God's desire for the manifestation of all uniqueness is concerned.

Each of us has been given a quality package of equal functional value with respect to what is necessary for the realization of our essential spiritual capacity. Since the quality package assigned by God fits essential spiritual capacity like an appropriate key fits a certain lock, any given individual's quality package is useless to everyone else. This is so because that package has the potential for unlocking only a specific lock in the form of a certain capacity.

Ultimately, no quality is of value unless it can be utilized advantageously in the quest for the realization of our spiritual uniqueness. According to Sufi masters, whatever inequalities exist in the composition of the qualities in the packages that have been assigned to us by God, such inequalities need to be seen in the light of the underlying equalities which they are intended to serve.

Apparent exceptions to the foregoing relationship between inequality and equality do exist. For example, there are people (i.e., infants, children and some adolescents) who do not seem to live long enough to really say they are being given an equal opportunity to realize their unique spiritual capacity.

However, for every departure from the relationship between inequality and equality, there are Divine concessions and compensations which become operative. Those who have not had an equal opportunity in the above sense will be subject to different considerations, none of which will be to the person's disadvantage.

These exceptions to the rule give expression to their own mode of uniqueness. As such, they are exceptions which prove the rule concerning God's desire for all modes of uniqueness to be manifested.

## Chapter 21

### Ghayr

In modern civilization one hears much talk of estrangement and alienation. For example, many of us speak about not feeling at home in our homes. We lament how familiar faces hide an existential strangeness and distance which separates us, in hard to define but fundamental ways, from the ones with whom we often are most physically and emotionally proximate.

We are lonely in the midst of people. We have affection for many people. We care about what happens to them. We seek varying kinds of companionship with them. We help them, and they help us in different ways.

Yet, there is an alien dimension to them which we frequently find frightening. There is an otherness (ghayr) about them which isolates us from each 'other'.

We experience this alien otherness with our spouses, our children, our parents and our relatives. Our friends bear the mark of otherness.

As we journey outward into the neighborhood, community, city, nation, the world and the universe, the sense of otherness intensifies in unpredictable and terrifying ways. We are haunted by the feeling things can go sour and turn on us at any moment.

We do not appear to live in a user-friendly world. In fact, we seem to be traveling in potentially hostile country almost on a continuous basis. The boundaries of that country extend from the beds in which we sleep and recedes outwardly through 360 degrees of arc, encompassing everything between us and the horizon.

The aura of otherness which pervades our lives affects virtually everything we think, feel and do. For instance, otherness is at the heart of the territorial imperative which governs much of our lives.

We spend a great deal of time, energy and resources marking and labeling that which is ours and to which the other is not entitled. We seem to need to constantly remind ourselves and the other that she or he is, indeed, the other.

We struggle with great diligence to reinforce the self/other boundary lines which distinguish our territory from all others. For most of

us, life is a game of Go in which, both consciously and unconsciously, we seek to maximize our spheres of influence while minimizing the spheres of influence of the other.

Much of our sense of personal space is constructed from materials of otherness. The degree of access to our personal space which we extend to anyone is a function of their otherness classification.

Few, if any, are granted entrance to the sanctum sanctorum in the innermost reaches of our being. This means, for most of us, that everyone and everything is rated as other in one way or another.

Business, government, law, sports, marriage, family, economics, international relations, and religion are all saturated with the ramifications of otherness. We treat the environment as an emphatic other.

Ironically, otherness is not just reserved for others. Many of us have become other to ourselves. Indeed, many of us have become so confused we cannot differentiate, within ourselves, what is self and what is other.

If we don't know who we are, then how can we know what is other? Our uncertainty about our own identity is often reflected in the changing patterns of otherness which we perceive in the world.

In other words, as our ideas about ourselves change, so, too, do the otherness classifications we issue to the people and things of the universe. Access codes to personal space are constantly being reconfigured.

The confusion between self and other within us is the source of much of the ambivalence we experience concerning ourselves. We are both attracted to, and repelled by, the denizens of the deep within us. There is both fear and hope concerning who we might be.

If we feel ambivalence toward ourselves, we cannot but project this ambivalence outwardly. In the mirror of the other, we see the image of our own ambivalence toward ourselves.

According to the masters of the Sufi path, the source of all otherness flows from our conscious decision to treat God as other. We are other to ourselves because we issue to God, just as we issue to everyone and everything else, an otherness classification. We have set the access code to the door of our hearts to reject God when Divinity buzzes us.

We treat God as other because we fail to recognize the presence of Divinity within us. We relegate God to otherness because we do not understand we are loci of manifestation of Divine

Names and Attributes and cannot be other than this. We try to restrict God to our various conceptual and emotional categories of otherness because we get caught up in the forms of otherness and do not see the One Whom is the common denominator linking all of these forms.

We treat others as other because we fail to recognize that they, too, are loci of manifestation of Divine Names and Attributes. Otherness, strangeness, separation, and distance are all illusions generated out of our spiritual ignorance and projected onto our experience.

If we could witness the reality of Divinity within us, we, automatically and simultaneously, could not but witness the reality of Divinity in others. In fact, others would no longer be other. We all would be participants in the theater of Divine manifestation known as existence.

Moreover, according to Sufi masters, we could take this one step further, and, simply say, there is no we in existence. Being is the locus of manifestation through which the reality of the one and only "I" gives expression to diversity of forms and meaning.

We are like sunspots on the surface of radiant Divinity. We do not understand that our darkness is an artifact of a relative absence of Presence which has been made possible by Divinity Itself.

When the forces underwriting this localized and relative darkness are dispelled, the full radiance of Divinity again is manifested. "Otherness", "we" and the false "I" all disappear with the darkness.

Oddly enough, many of us fight tooth and nail to retain our darkness. We seem to fear the possibility of the Sun's return with the disappearance of the temporary and relative absence of presence which we experience as spiritual darkness.

Darkness may involve all manner of misery, but, at least, it is "our" darkness. We derive identity from our darkness and its concomitant misery.

We fear the lost of this identity, such as it is, because we do not know what will replace it. We seem to feel being "other" is better than not being at all.

The practitioners of the Sufi path tell us the only thing to be lost is the darkness. In losing the darkness, we will reclaim the radiance which always had been intended for us.

Sufi masters indicate that the only thing which will cease to exist are the illusions generated by the darkness of otherness. The falsehood of our ego will be replaced by the reality of our essence.

The inertia of otherness stops us from seeking to dispel the darkness. Otherness has a vested interest in maintaining the system of otherness classifications through which it parcels up existence, including its own.

Sufi masters try to show us the nature of this system of otherness which we -- through our darkness -- have generated. They also try to help us, God willing, to activate and realize our potentials for radiance which dissolves all sense of otherness.

## **Chapter 22**

### **Kashf**

There are two kinds of unveiling (kashf) which occur on the Sufi path. One of these is potentially detrimental to the mystical wayfarer. The other can be a source of great blessings for, and help to, the individual.

The first mode of kashf or unveiling concerns the nature and events of the world. The second form of unveiling gives expression to spiritual realities which transcend the realm of the world.

When, by God's command, an individual is provided with a method for: accessing foreknowledge of worldly events; or, being a witness to events going on elsewhere in the world, without leaving one's residence and without any modern technological assistance; or, becoming privy to the details of the past, present and future of whomever one likes, then such a mystical wayfarer is confronted with a very substantial trial and risk.

There are two options for dealing with this situation. The individual can use her or his discretion for determining whether or not to utilize the abilities which God has made available. The person can wait for instructions from Divinity concerning the use of those abilities.

Whenever the mystical wayfarer uses his or her discretion with respect to whether or not to access hidden knowledge concerning the world, two contingencies come into play. First, this individual will have to answer to God on the Day of Judgment for each and every discretionary use of worldly kashf. Secondly, every time one makes discretionary use of worldly kashf, one runs a risk that one's spiritual progress will come to a standstill.

An individual may believe she or he is using worldly kashf only to help others. This may or may not be so. However, one thing is certain. The intentions, motivations, attitudes, understandings, goals, and purposes of a person who makes discretionary use of worldly kashf will come under the closest of Divine scrutiny and cross-examination.

The individual cannot presume she or he will come through the rigors of this investigation in unscathed fashion. The ordeal of being subjected to the intensity of the aforementioned scrutiny is, in and of itself, likely to raise the question of just how necessary was such discretionary use of worldly kashf.

Nevertheless, on the Day of Judgment, second thoughts don't count. One must be prepared to accept the consequences of the choices one makes in the present life. So, as is sometimes said in the military: "Be advised!"

Having access to hidden knowledge concerning the world and its people can be very seductive and tempting. One may start out in a seemingly innocuous manner, only to discover, if one is fortunate, one is getting caught up in the world in, yet, another way.

Whether one is entangled in the world through "normal" means or through non-ordinary channels, is a moot point. In either case, entanglement means one has lost one's spiritual purpose.

If one loses one's spiritual way on a "lower" level or on a "higher" level, one remains lost in both cases. In fact, one's predicament may be much worse in the latter case since more is expected of the individual. This individual should have known better than to get seduced by the allurements of hidden knowledge concerning the world.

The foregoing comments notwithstanding, there are occasions when use of worldly kashf or unveiling may be required in the service of others. This especially may be true with respect to the kinds of thing a shaykh may do, from time to time, to help an initiate at certain stages of the mystical journey.

Nevertheless, one is better off when directives in these matters come from Divinity. Waiting, with patience, for Divine assistance is, spiritually, far superior to trying, with impatience, to take matters into one's own hands. The former approach is the best form of spiritual etiquette in these matters.

Some people may wonder why individuals should be given access to hidden knowledge while, simultaneously, being told to refrain from taking advantage of this kind of knowledge. One reason for juxtaposing such extraordinary possibilities next to the challenge of restraint is to test the individual concerning whether he or she prefers lordship over servanthood.

Ultimately, the Sufi path is a journey toward perfect servanthood. Those who become attracted to, if not addicted by, the discretionary use of worldly kashf, are indicating a preference for



lordship. This inclination or preference becomes an obstacle to making further progress on the Sufi path.

In a sense, one becomes all dressed up with the powers of worldly kashf but with no spiritual place to go. At best, wherever one may be spiritually, on whatever level, one becomes stuck there and unable to fully realize the spiritual purpose of one's life.

At worst, things begin to deteriorate spiritually. One falls further and further away from the mystical path. Yet, the tragedy of this is one may not be aware this is happening because one still has use of the "toys" of worldly kashf.

The other kind of kashf, mentioned previously, concerns spiritual unveilings. These are transcendent to the sort of hidden knowledge about the affairs of the world which is the focus of the worldly mode of kashf.

Spiritual kashf involves unveilings in the form of experiences involving states and stations of the mystical path. Through Divine "flashes", intuitions, visions and so on, one receives knowledge, wisdom and insights about various spiritual realities.

The understanding gained from this form of kashf can be extremely useful to wayfarers of the Sufi path. Such understanding serves to guide, support, strengthen, protect, purify, perfect and illumine the individual's mystical travels.

Worldly kashf, for the most part, cannot assist the individual in any of the above mentioned ways. In other words, with certain exceptions, worldly kashf really has no useful role to play on the mystical journey.

There is only one cautionary proviso which needs to be stated in relation to spiritual kashf. This mode of mystical unveiling is not the goal of the Sufi path. Spiritual kashf is a means, not an end.

The goal of the Sufi path is to become a perfect servant of God through realizing one's essential identity and capacity. Spiritual kashf assists one in the pursuit of this primary objective of the mystical journey.

If one should become preoccupied with spiritual kashf, in and of itself, and, therefore, somewhat divorced from the proper focus of the Sufi path, one becomes spiritually at risk. These risks may not be quite the same as those which are associated with discretionary use of worldly kashf, but the risks to further spiritual progress are, nonetheless, still there.

More specifically, if one wishes to reach a particular destination, one cannot permit the beauty and majesty of the landscape to distract one from the original goal. This is especially the case if one is under a time constraint concerning how long one has to complete the journey to the intended destination.

If one spends too much time by the roadside smelling the flowers, one may never reach one's destination in time. As with everything else in life, one must keep things in a balance of proper moderation.

## Chapter 23

### Humility

Humility is not exactly a growth industry in today's world. However, Sufi masters maintain this quality is of fundamental importance to the mystical path.

Humility is both a fruit of the path, as well as a key which, God willing, opens the door to further possibilities of spiritual growth during the mystical journey. Nonetheless, one does not seek humility as a means to something else. Humility has an intrinsic spiritual worth.

To varying degrees, most of us are lacking in humility. There are different reasons for this.

Some of this relative deficiency in humility is due to the times in which we live. From a very early age, many of us taught, both within our families and in school, to be somewhat aggressive and assertive in promoting ourselves.

Being able to impress other people, helps create opportunities. We have to let other people know who we are and what we can do.

As long as one can deliver, as long as one can back up the self-promotion with competence, skill, talent and intelligence, then a certain amount of cocky confidence is considered by our society as not only acceptable, but admirable, if not necessary. Such confidence is thought to be an important ingredient in the quest for success and accomplishment.

On the other hand, too much of this self-promotional assertiveness, becomes annoying and, often, is counterproductive. It rubs people the wrong way and generates friction, conflict and animosity.

To grasp the boundaries of propriety in this area of self-promotion, not to mention the more difficult challenge of acquiring humility, can be a trying and humbling affair. Many hard lessons concerning self-promotion and humility have to be digested during the socialization process involving family, friends, school and work.

Unfortunately, the problems of learning how to live within the boundaries of propriety, or learning the more demanding qualities of humility, is exacerbated by many aspects of modern life. For example, all too many professional athletes, television and movie stars, recording artists,

cultural icons and politicians think of arrogance and self-centeredness as virtues. Indeed, relative to many of these people, who don't seem to know the meaning of propriety, mere cocky confidence would seem like the essence of humility itself.

The "example" being set by some of these paragons of excess and braggadocio is having an increasingly devastating impact on grade schools, high schools, colleges and universities. The atmosphere they help to create is conducive to the breeding of all manner of arrogance, pride, and conceit in the minds and hearts of those who worship at the altar of their idols.

Power, money, fame, talent, and intelligence have a way of eating away at the line separating a certain degree of self-confidence and the slippery slope of pride. However, we all have the potential to cross this line even if our circumstances should be entirely modest and without, for example, celebrity status of any kind.

The Sufi masters speak of the pharaoh within each of us. This is our tendency toward feeling superior to others. The pharaoh within us is naturally inclined to a sense of self-importance and operates according to the belief it has a right to be self-indulgent, self-centered and vain.

Our pharaoh considers itself to have an exalted place in the scheme of things, no matter how small the desert may be in which it reigns supreme. Occupying such a lofty place, entitles us, or so our pharaoh believes, to treat other people with contempt and disrespect.

Conversely, our pharaoh does not tolerate being on the receiving end of contempt or disrespect from anyone else. Much of the "dissing" phenomenon that is current and leads to so many ugly confrontations is an expression of what happens when pharaoh meets pharaoh.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, each of us is charged with the task of Prophet Moses (peace be upon him). We must convey the message of God to our pharaohs, both collectively and individually, to let our people go.

We must struggle with our pharaohs in order to journey toward the promised land of humility. To achieve humility, is, by the grace of

God, to be modest in all things and to give deference and veneration to others.

Humility is about having no expectation toward others concerning what is due to one. Moreover, when one is wronged or dealt with unjustly, one is gentle, mild and forbearing in response.

Humility is to prefer others to oneself. Humility is to have an heartfelt respect for the essential worth of all human beings, as well as all of creation.

Humility is a matter of being ready to yield to the wishes of others and knowing when this yielding is appropriate to do with respect to the requirements of spiritual etiquette. Humility is filled with the wisdom of understanding the rights which have been given to others by God.

There is a certain kind of humbleness about humility which places things in perspective. To have humility, is to be aware of one's faults and weaknesses. Therefore, the person of humility, neither swells up with pride at the sound of praise, nor is that individual deflated when criticism comes her or his way.

One cannot have humility without being immersed in submission before, and servitude to, God. In fact, this submission and servitude is the fertile soil out of which the flower of humility grows.

Sufi masters are very adept in showing initiates how to till the soil of servitude. Spiritual guides do this through their own beautiful example of servitude and submission.

Sufi shaykhs also care for the seeds of humility which have been planted in human beings by God. They provide spiritual nourishment and protection for the struggling seedling.

In addition, spiritual guides are very skilled in helping to remove the weeds of the individual's ego which threaten to strangle the growth of humility. In this respect, one kind of off-shoot of the ego which is particularly dangerous and must be removed from the garden of the soul is the weed of false humility.

The ego has a great capacity for mimicry. In order to serve its ultimate agenda, the ego can take on the external appearance of, among other things, humility.

The ego can appear meek, mild, submissive, humble, respectful and deferential. However, all of this is a self-serving act to enhance its own sense of self-aggrandizement. For example, when others comment on how humble and respectful the person of false humility is, inwardly such a person exults in the rays of praise extended to him or her. People of false humility live for this sort of notice and acknowledgment. For them, humility is not a spiritual issue. Rather, it is an issue of ego gratification.

People of false humility are very annoyed if people fail to take notice of their "spiritual" condition. Moreover, when the desired acknowledgment is not forthcoming, they tend to get moody, sullen, and withdrawn. They often feel people do not appreciate their true spiritual greatness.

Differentiating between true humility and false humility can be quite difficult. To do so, takes either: (a) the experienced eye and understanding of a Sufi shaykh; or, (b) the spiritual training which can be gained through the shaykh.

To have humility, does not mean the individual is devoid of self-esteem. However, this sense of self worth has nothing to do with the sort of cocky confidence spoken of earlier.

One has esteem for the spiritual self because it provides us with the opportunity for realizing our relationship with God. One values the spiritual self because it is a unique gift from God which contains hidden within it a vast array of spiritual treasures, one of which is humility.

## Chapter 24

### Balance

One of the most sought after, yet elusive, qualities in life is balance. We are besieged with a plethora of problems and issues which are demanding our attention: finances, family, career, education, meaning, desires, spirituality, friends, politics, health, fears, love, pollution, identity, crime, purpose, death and so on.

How do we budget our time and set our priorities to do justice to these issues? Furthermore, even if we could find the time and energy to delve into these areas with something more than superficial commitment, what should we do? What exactly does doing justice to these issues entail?

How we view death often has a huge influence on how we go about living life. Our attitudes toward death affect our system of values, goals and choices.

Who we believe ourselves to be, has ramifications for education, family, career, politics, crime and love. Are we animals? If so, what kind of animal are we?

Are we rational beings? If so, what does it mean to be rational?

Do we have a soul? If so, what, if anything, follows from this with respect to the question of identity?

What does being healthy mean? One can be physically fit and, yet, be emotionally crippled. One can be emotionally and psychologically well-adjusted to a given set of societal norms and, nonetheless, turn a blind eye to injustice, abuse, homelessness, poverty, hunger and corruption.

Some might say the ability to shut out the world and stay focused on only the things one can control is the key to emotional and psychological stability in a complex world. Yet, how many times do we discover, much to our chagrin, that the world we have shut out has the capacity to radically affect what we can and cannot control in our own lives?

No one is an island because it is in the nature of the world to refuse to leave us alone. Even if we do not go seeking the world, nonetheless, the world will come looking for us.

We may be convinced we are, in some sense of the word, spiritual beings. We may even be very much involved in spiritual activities of one sort or another.

We may prioritize our lives as a function of spiritual values, orientation and the like. Yet, in our heart of hearts, in the stillness of the night, we may wonder about: why we still have doubts and why we feel so empty and estranged from everything—especially God.

We are constantly borrowing from Paul to pay Peter and, then, borrowing from Mary to pay Paul, and so on. More specifically, we devote time to our career by borrowing, if not stealing, time from our families. We borrow money in order to buy things in order to try to make up for what we have borrowed from our families. We steal time and energy away from the pressing social issues of the day in order to work to pay back the money we have borrowed to give to our families.

We borrow time from spiritual pursuits to devote toward satisfying various sorts of physical, emotional and psychological desires we have. We go to weekly religious services as a kind of down payment on our intention to do more spiritually in the future.

We borrow time from a whole set of activities in order to have the opportunity for an education to prepare for a career and, possibly, to learn the meaning of life. When our education is completed, we borrow some more time and energy in order to go fishing, or whatever, and reflect on why we always seem to be running behind on our payments to life.

Juggling is not taught in the vast majority of public schools, secondary schools, universities and colleges of the world. There are no post-doctoral programs in the art of juggling.

If you want to be a juggler, then join the circus or go to clown school. However, many of us feel very much like clowns because our lives appear, in so many ways, to be circus-like. Our lives are filled with: animal acts; high wire feats performed without a net; death-defying stunts; fast-foods; showmanship; a lot of moving from place to place, and, finally, a fairly substantial mess to clean up before we fold up our tents and silently steal away into the night.

We have a sense in which, as card-carrying circus performers we ought to know how to juggle the different parts of our lives.



Unfortunately, most of us are unable to do so because no one has taught us the necessary skills.

The Sufi masters are very accomplished jugglers. They have dedicated the better part of their lives to learning the techniques, discipline, concentration and aesthetics necessary to be artful practitioners with respect to meeting the extraordinary challenge of keeping all the components of life in harmonious movement.

In order to be a proficient juggler in the mystical sense, one should try to learn when and how to grab hold of a component of life. Furthermore, in order to ply one's craft competently, one also needs to know when and how to let go of the various aspects of one's life. One also needs to know where to place these features as one releases them.

In addition, one needs to know how to simultaneously focus on what is at hand, as well as to be aware of what is going on around one. To be capable of juggling excellence, one must be prepared to improvise, on the spur of the moment, as unforeseen contingencies threaten the harmonious movement of the different components of one's life.

To be a Sufi juggler, one must learn to trust one's inherent capacity to juggle. However, before one can learn to trust oneself in this regard, one must learn how to trust the individual who is helping one to develop juggling skills.

Without trust of this latter sort, one will never find one's way to realizing one's inherent capacity for juggling. Without trust in one's teacher one will never come to understand, with any clarity or intensity, that learning how to juggle is a fundamental part of the calling and purpose of human existence.

To be a Sufi juggler, one has to have a deep, sincere and abiding desire to commit oneself to all that becoming a juggler presupposes. One must be prepared to make sacrifices and to accept the rigors of the training program. One must be ready to patiently deal with, and persevere through, the frustrations of protracted periods of juggling incompetency, before one experiences the joy and exhilaration of being, if God wishes, a successful participant in such an art form.

Ultimately, to be a Sufi juggler, one must understand that one is not the juggler but the 'jugglee'. One is the object being juggled. One's life, in all its myriad aspects, is brought into harmonious movement by the

Supreme Juggler. As such, learning to be a Sufi juggler involves giving oneself over to that process and not interfering with it, and, thereby, permitting the forces of balance and harmony to flow through one in an unimpeded fashion.

To be a Sufi juggler, one must abandon one's desire to be a juggler. To be a Sufi juggler, one must be content with being a witness to, and servant of, the acts of the one and only true juggler in existence.

To attain this station of understanding may seem to be a rather dubious, if not trivial, achievement. Nevertheless, those individuals who have been permitted to bring this process to resolution are deeply satisfied with the result and prefer it to all other possibilities. They indicate that all lasting and non-illusory meaning, purpose, identity, significance, direction, value, and balance are derived from, and through, such an understanding.

## Chapter 25

### Awe

How is it possible to meditate on the universe within us and beyond us and not be overcome by a deep, abiding sense of the majesty, wonder, mystery, power, subtlety and beauty which pervades all manner of being? In fact, this sense of awe can be so overwhelming and touch the soul so intensely that most of us tend to keep it at a distance.

To the extent we allow ourselves to entertain such experiences at all, we often tend to permit them to surface only very briefly and in an attenuated manner. After all, these experiences tend to be counter-productive in the work-a-day world.

Furthermore, compared to the intensity and depth of feeling involved in the experience of awe, one has difficulty reconciling this with the numbing way we often go about living our lives. Indeed, for a variety of different "reasons", we spend so much of our time living in a socially and individually constructed cocoon from which awe has been excluded, many of us no longer seem to be able to have any sense of awe whatsoever. Many of us have lost contact with this dimension of our being.

Human knowledge is said, by some, to be doubling every ten years or less. Some say this rate of doubling is accelerating.

Yet, despite all of this accumulation of so-called knowledge, we know next to nothing about: memory, consciousness, intelligence, creativity, cosmic possibility, ecology, other galaxies, the origins of life, language, human identity, death, health or illness. The list could be extended indefinitely.

We have many, many more questions than answers. Moreover, whatever answers we do have are being updated all the time because we didn't get it right the first, second, third or fourth time around.

Who are we? What are we doing here? Where do we come from? Where are we going?

Is there any purpose to existence? What meaning do events have? Is truth discovered or invented? Are there any absolutes?

What should one do with one's life? Why do some people die sooner than others? What is the nature of justice? Do we have free will?

For every declarative statement we make, we can come up with a multiplicity of interrogative rejoinders. We are awash in theories of all kinds: scientific, philosophical, theological, political, economic, artistic, historical, psychological, social and educational. However, there is a potentially gigantic difference between having a theory and knowing the truth of a matter.

The lifetimes of millions of people have been consumed with the battle to identify a few tentative conjectures before the onslaught of a raging sea of unknowns. Perhaps, in the light of the ephemeral nature of the rewards to be garnered from such a titanic struggle, the tendency of most of us to retreat into the banality of fashion, television, careers, sports, material acquisition, hobbies, movies, parties and various addictions becomes understandable.

To be sure, the more one understands, the greater can be one's appreciation for the incredible richness and intricacy of any given aspect of existence. Yet, even if we know little or nothing about the nature of things, we seem to have an intrinsic capacity to feel awe for the wonder and mystery and beauty of the worlds within and without us.

We look up into the sky at night and see the stars, the moon and some planets, and, providing we have not allowed ourselves to become desensitized, we can become engrossed just by witnessing these marvels, without necessarily understanding any of it. To be thrilled by the rippling, pulsating and cascading movements of the Northern and Southern lights requires absolutely no knowledge or understanding of the process of ionization.

In fact, from the perspective of Sufi masters, understanding the process of ionization in the upper atmosphere does not exhaust the realities which underwrite that physical phenomenon. The physical realm is only the most apparent realm of manifestation of a reality which goes far, far deeper than the purely physical.

We see a sunset or sunrise (with apologies to Copernicus et. al.), and we are transfixed. We experience the majestic, powerful presence of lightning, or tornadoes, or floods, or hurricanes or earthquakes, and we are humbled before them. We are moved by compassion, or empathy, or love, or beauty, or generosity, not because we necessarily understand these processes, but because we have the capacity to resonate with these forces.

We know what we know, even if we don't understand what we know. What we know is mystery and wonder and majesty and grandeur and beauty. What we know is what we feel with our hearts and spirits. What we know is laughter and tears and fear and joy. What we know are questions? What we know is awe.

Much of the foregoing comments concern the physical/material world or universe. Reality, however, extends beyond the realm of the material level of manifestation. In fact, the material world, as vast and nuanced as it is, is only a minuscule portion of what is.

In addition to the material/physical modalities of being, there are other levels which give expression to: the souls of things; the angelic realm; the realities of the Names and Attributes of God; the abode of fixed essences, and, finally, the truth and reality of God's Essence which transcends, and is entirely independent of, all the other realms.

Indeed, all these other realms presuppose, and are dependent on, the Divine Essence, although the Divine Essence cannot be reduced to or likened to any of these other realms.

The Divine Essence makes all of these other realms possible. Nonetheless, we cannot make any inference about the nature of the Divine Essence based on manifestations in these other realms.

According to the realized practitioners of the Sufi sciences, all of these realms which are a mysterious function of the unknowable Divine Essence are far more vast than the physical/material world. They are infinite in nature.

There are Sufi practitioners who have journeyed to, and experienced, to varying degrees, these various realms. Some of it has been written or spoken about. The vast majority of such experiences, however, fall beyond language or description and, sometimes, even understanding. They are undergone, but, sometimes, this is about all that can be said about them.

These experiences often are characterized by, among other possibilities, a sense of inundation in raw, naked, overwhelming, mesmerizing, intoxicating, stupefying, powerfully intense awe. Such experiences of awe help color, shape, orient and modulate how the Sufi interacts with and perceives other human beings and, in fact, the whole universe.

Awe generally becomes a powerful organizing force in the life of a Sufi. The richer and more intense and subtle one's experiences of awe, the greater is the potential for transformation of the life, thinking, understanding, feeling and activity of the Sufi.

## Chapter 26

### Gardens

Gardens, both wild and cultivated, appear to have an attraction, of near universal proportions, for human beings. Different races, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious traditions, and eras have all been drawn to gardens.

One might wonder why this should be the case. Why do gardens appeal to us in such a deeply satisfying manner?

To be sure, the flowers, shrubs, trees, and grass have both individual, as well as collective, beauty. In addition, the diversity of shapes is intriguing, and the endless combination of floral arrangements is fascinating. Moreover, everything contributes to the wonderful bouquet of aromas which vary in character throughout the day and night.

Toss in the mystery of the unfolding of life going on in the garden, and one might suppose all of the foregoing explains why most people are inclined to gardens. The answer, however, may run deeper still.

We find gardens peaceful and restful. Gardens seem to induce us to reflect on life. We find varying degrees of contentment and joy from gardens.

We come away from gardens refreshed. There appears to be some kind of energy or source of renewal which we take away with us from gardens.

There is almost a timeless quality to gardens. Things do change but, somehow, time often seems to be suspended. The rest of the world recedes.

Our senses are somewhat intoxicated from the effects of gardens. Our minds are massaged. Gardens tug at our hearts and emotions. Every aspect of our being seems to be connected to and affected by gardens.

We are captivated by the balance and harmony in gardens. Thoughts and remembrance of God tend to arise naturally in the context of gardens.

Sufi masters indicate physical gardens are only one variety in a spectrum of infinite diversity. In fact, the gardens of the physical world are

but a distant reflection of the gardens associated with spiritual possibilities.

Whatever contentment, peace, joy, happiness, rest, refreshment, wonder, beauty, fascination, intoxication and satisfaction we may receive from physical gardens is virtually nothing compared to what can be experienced in different kinds of spiritual garden. On the basis of experience and not theoretical speculation, Sufi masters note there is no way to describe the intensity, depth, richness, subtlety, and diversity inherent in spiritual gardens. At best, one only can allude, in a very limited way, to a few superficial dimensions of the experiences involving nonphysical gardens.

Our senses, mind, and heart are drawn to gardens because their many qualities strike a resonance deep within our being. For people of insight and understanding, such as Sufi masters, the qualities of the gardens of the physical world are but a sign of the existence of other non-physical gardens which have garden-like qualities capable of reaching even further into the possibilities of our essential being.

The meaning of "garden-like qualities" in the foregoing refers to the capacity of non-physical gardens to generate, albeit on a much grander scale of both majesty and beauty, a sense of peace, joy, refreshment, contentment and so on, just as physical gardens do. The character of these non-physical "gardens", however, may not have anything in common with the structural forms given expression through physical gardens. In fact, some spiritual gardens are without any form whatsoever, yet induce in us extremely intense experiences which are somewhat analogous to those engendered in us in physical gardens.

One does not necessarily have to leave the physical plane to get some semblance of taste of a non-physical garden. In the garden of association with one's spiritual guide, one experiences garden-like qualities.

When one is with one's shaykh or teacher, one feels at peace. One is happy, joyful, and restful. One discovers contentment in the presence of one's spiritual guide. Time almost seems to be suspended. The rest of the world becomes relatively unimportant.

Life seems more balanced and harmonious with one's teacher. One finds thoughts of God and remembrance of God come more easily in the



presence of the shaykh. One is more given to reflection when associating with one's spiritual guide.

One is drawn to the beauty of one's spiritual guide. One keeps discovering new facets of wonder and fascination.

One can become extremely intoxicated or ecstatic in the presence of the shaykh. One comes away from the teacher refreshed and invigorated. One longs to return to the garden of spiritual association as quickly as possible.

Sufi masters refer to many other kinds of garden. There are, for example, gardens of remembrance which are accessed through saying the Names of God.

When, by the grace of God, one is summoned into the reality of these Names and opened up to their infinite meanings of overwhelming beauty and majesty, one is transported to gardens unlike any in the physical realm. One is given entrance to gardens beyond all description.

There are gardens of forgetfulness in which one is released from the veils of the false self. There are gardens of subsistence in God when one's true, essential self is realized.

There are gardens of gnosis. In these gardens one has direct, certain, unmediated knowledge of God. In these gardens God discloses different dimensions or facets of Divinity.

There are gardens for every spiritual station. There are gardens of repentance and longing. There are gardens of dependence on God. There are gardens of gratitude, and so on.

One travels from gardens of friendship to gardens of exclusive friendship. One is transported from gardens of passion to gardens of ardent affection.

There are gardens of love in which the spirit soars in flights of intimacy with Divinity. One becomes both enslaved and bewildered by the infinite beauty of the Face of the Beloved in these gardens.

There are gardens of uniqueness. If God wishes, one is opened up to the mystery which is breathed into one's essential nature by Divinity.

There are countless other gardens. No two gardens are the same

No two spiritual gardens give the same kind of joy and happiness. No two gardens give the same modality of contentment, peace and satisfaction. No

two spiritual gardens disclose the same Divine colors. No two gardens share the same wonder and beauty. No two spiritual gardens bring the same flavor of ecstasy. No two gardens show the same kind of balance and harmony.

The point of embarkation for the possibility of journeying to any and all of the aforementioned gardens is in the garden of spiritual association with the shaykh. Without this association, the nearest one will come to a first-hand experience of any of these other gardens is a spiritual travelogue such as the one itemized previously.

## Chapter 27

### Hatred

On one level, hatred involves ignorance concerning the nature of God's plan for existence. Generally speaking, whenever we hate someone or something, we have no use for the person, thing, or process in question.

We do not see why what is hated should be the way it is. We tend to believe life and/or the world would be a much better place if the object of our hatred did not exist.

In effect, we are ignorant of how, for instance, the person we hate fits into God's plan. We don't know what cosmic or spiritual purposes that individual has. We don't know how God is using the person to bring about various effects. We don't know what the nature of the relationship is between God and the individual we hate.

During the course of a life time, one person touches the lives of many other people, both in minor, as well as, in major ways. To try to calculate how life would be different if a given person had never lived is beyond our capacity to calculate.

Even if a person is a miserable human being, we cannot conclude, automatically, everybody's life would be immeasurably better if such a person did not exist. Sometimes we learn the most about ourselves and the nature of life through close encounters of the "worst" kind.

To use certain people as negative role models is not an uncommon practice. We tell ourselves or our children: "Don't be like so and so". Quite frequently, this sort of lesson sticks in our mind and plays an important role in shaping our character and behavior.

Maybe one of the reasons why such people exist is because God wanted other individuals to take heed in their own lives to avoid turning out like those people. Perhaps, God created such people as a spiritual challenge or trial or test for whomever they come into contact with.

If so, then, ironically, we owe such people a debt of gratitude. This is so because they have been an opportunity for us to grow spiritually and derive benefit. Conceivably, if not for these "people of difficulty", we might not have learned certain important lessons in life.

There have been movies like Frank Capra's 'It's A Wonderful Life', or stories involving time travel, in which this issue is addressed. How would life

be different if so and so never had existed or such and such an event had never happened?

Sufi masters indicate life is an integrated whole. We are all in this together, and we are all in this for a purpose.

Ecology is not just about how biological and physical systems interact and affect one another through dynamic, intricate, subtle relationships. Ecology also extends into the emotional, mental and spiritual realms.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, if something has been brought into existence by God, then that thing has a role to play on a variety of levels within the ecology of Being. Nothing exists by chance or arbitrarily or without serving a number of roles in the Divine scheme of things.

Consequently, when we hate someone or something, this is an acknowledgment of our ignorance of how everything fits together. If we understood existence from a Divine perspective, we would see the benefits which come from everyone and everything in creation, despite the appearances of life events.

Of course, knowing the spiritual significance of something may not make that something any less of a problem for us to have to learn to master. However, at least, things are placed in their proper perspective, and having a reliable framework of guidance through which to engage such issues, can be an extremely important asset.

Death, illness, tragedy, difficulty, struggle, conflict, antagonism, hostility and hatred all have a reason for being. We either learn how to use them for our spiritual benefit, or they will consume and use us. There is no neutral territory in this matter.

As long as we are entangled in a web of hatred, we cannot derive spiritual benefit from the situation. We are being controlled and consumed by the hatred and, therefore, are damaging ourselves spiritually. If nothing else, we are losing the opportunity for spiritual growth.

A corollary of the foregoing theme of ignorance (concerning the Divine reasons why the things we hate exist) is the following. When we hate something, we, in effect, are criticizing God.

There generally is a sort of self-righteousness in our hatred. We feel justified in hating whatever it is we hate.

Nonetheless, our hatred is not justified, no matter what has happened. This is the case because whatever has happened has been with the permission of God.

According to the direct mystical experiences of the practitioners of the Sufi path, God never does the least injustice to creation. If we don't see it that way, then there is something wrong with the way we see and understand the nature of life.

Almost invariably, we speculate about the significance and meaning of events without having any direct proof of the validity of any of our speculations. Almost all of our conclusions are drawn from premises of ignorance concerning the relationship between Divinity and creation.

Whatever has happened has a spiritual role to play by becoming a channel for blessings and grace from God, in this world and/or the next, if one learns how to deal with the situation properly from a spiritual point of view.

To hate a person or situation or thing, is to say God is doing something wrong by letting that person, situation or thing be as she, he, or it is. To hate, carries with it an implicit sense of justification for wishing whatever we hate to be other than it is. We are self-righteously condemning God for letting things unfold as they do.

God is not doing anything wrong. We are the ones who are wrong for jumping to conclusions before all the facts are in and before we have any appreciation of what those facts mean from God's perspective. We are the ones who are wrong for not discovering how we should respond spiritually to the situation.

All events demand a response from us. However, not every way of responding is constructive or spiritually beneficial.

Hatred is an ill-conceived response from beginning to end. Hatred is a breach of the spiritual etiquette from which practitioners of the Sufi path draw in order to be able to respond to life situations in a spiritually constructive manner.

According to Sufi masters, one of the signs hatred is not a justified response to life events is the way in which it induces, sooner or later, negative consequences to rebound against the person who hates. These consequences may come in many different forms and may seem to have little or nothing to do with the context of hatred.

One may suffer financially or socially. Difficulties may arise in one's marriage or family. One may become ill or suffer emotionally or mentally in some way.

To hate, involves, knowingly or unknowingly, criticism of God. Criticism of God removes one from the protection of Mercy and Compassion which God extends to us. As a result, we become vulnerable to various currents of difficulty and hardship which permeate this plane of existence. Hatred has more consequences than we can imagine.

The Sufi masters indicate God has not taken this protection away. We have removed ourselves through our actions.

The difficulties which have come our way as a result of our transgression of hatred need not be a permanent condition. For instance, if we repent and seek God's forgiveness for our ignorance about, and criticism of, Divinity, then, God willing, the grace and blessings which protect us from such difficulties will be extended to us once again.

Repentance, however, is only sincere if we take serious steps to terminate the kind of attitudes, emotions or behavior which led to the need for repentance in the first place. In the present case, this means struggling to overcome, God willing, our tendency toward hatred.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Detachment**

Indifference is not a synonym for mystical detachment. The individual who, by the grace of God, has acquired the quality of detachment is not above it all, but very much in it all.

The secret lies not just in how one is in it all. The secret also concerns the nature of that which one is all in.

One cannot be detached, in the Sufi sense of the word, without submitting to the will of God. Detachment means to become disengaged from one's own will and to become a locus of manifestation for the will of God. In fact, the process of becoming detached from one's own will is an expression of becoming attached to the will of God.

As long as we prefer our own perspective to God's will, we cannot achieve detachment. As long as we persist in being entangled in our desires, moods, and attitudes, we are not free to align ourselves with the will of God. To the extent we insist on pursuing the gratifications generated by the dialectic of ego, body and the world, we will be separated from the condition of detachment.

Upon hearing about the idea of mystical detachment, many people react negatively and wonder how, for instance, a detached person can be loving and compassionate. Detachment sounds so cold and uncaring.

In reality, we cannot be truly loving and compassionate until we are oriented toward everything by means of detachment. The attachments, preoccupations and entanglements of our egos prevent us from being loving and compassionate human beings.

Like the destructive form of cholesterol, ego and worldly attachments cling to the walls of our spiritual arteries and block the passage of the flow of love and compassion. In ways reminiscent of medical practitioners, Sufi masters tell us to refrain, as much as we can, from a steady diet of the attachments of the ego because of their injurious effects on our spiritual system. Nonetheless, we continue to consume all the worldly things which are harmful to us.

One cannot be suffering from the spiritual counterpart to arteriosclerosis and, yet, be free from the symptoms of the disease. One

experiences a pain and discomfort in the heart which spreads to other parts of one's being. The heart becomes dysfunctional in a variety of ways.

One has difficulty breathing in the joy and beauty of life. There is a general lassitude and drop in spiritual energy levels. One becomes more sensitive to, and less able to constructively deal with, stress and strain. One feels a sense of existential malaise.

Someone who is caught up in the throes of the disease process tends to withdraw, to varying degrees, from the activities going on around one. One might like to show compassion for, or help, others, but due to one's disabled condition, one is not in a spiritual position to do so.

When the heart has been cleansed of attachment to other than God, the heart becomes a fountain of love and compassion which is offered freely to all of creation. The love and compassion of the heart of detachment is inherently generous and active and dynamic.

The heart of detachment gives expression to part of the spiritual legacy of the human being. Such a heart is operating in accordance with the specifications called for by the Divine blueprints.

The heart of detachment is charismatic and magnetic. It has an appeal which is extremely attractive to almost everyone coming into proximity with its radiating sphere of influence. Consequently, we tend to want to attach ourselves to the people of mystical detachment.

Detachment is like an inertial guidance system. No matter what the nature of the potentially disruptive forces are which are acting on the individual, the person of detachment always stays on course. Whatever adjustments need to be made to counter the effects of such forces are implemented.

The person of detachment locks on to the will of God and does not permit any other kind of guidance to take priority in his or her journey. However, this process of locking-on, does not imply rigidity, inflexibility or fanaticism of any kind.

All too frequently, when we believe we are locking-on to the will of God, we are merely tuning into the noise of our own likes and dislikes. In our confusion we sometimes become unyielding in our approach to things as we operate under the mistaken belief we are doing God's will when, in fact, we only are doing our own will.

Although the will of God permits many things to transpire in the affairs of human beings, some of our intentions and motivations are more consonant



with the spirit and essence of Divine will than are other instances of our intentions and motivations. Compassion, love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, co-operation, peace, justice, tolerance, mercy, nobility, fairness, and patience are but a few of the qualities close to the heart, so to speak, of God's will.

An individual who, by the grace of God, is cloaked in the above mentioned attributes, is someone through whom the will of God can be manifested in a way which is capable of benefitting humanity and all of creation. Someone who is cloaked in such qualities tends not to be inflexible or rigid or fanatical. Instead, this individual tends to operate creatively and aesthetically through a set of permissible degrees of freedom which allow accommodations to be made without compromising the person's submission to the will of God.

The gateway to becoming adorned in these kinds of quality is detachment. Until one has cast off the garments of the ego, one will not be allowed into the Divine fitting room.

Detachment permits one to focus on the essential in all circumstances. Detachment removes one from the distractions of the ego and the world.

Detachment fortifies one against the onslaught of forces seeking to corrupt intention and motivation. Detachment allows one to distinguish between the true self and the false self. Detachment provides the understanding and freedom through which to recognize, and do, the will of God in a way that is pleasing to God.



## Chapter 29

### Jinn

There are, at least, two categories of created being which have the capacity for spiritual progress. One category of being, capable of spiritual development, is human, and the other category of being with this potential concerns jinn.

God has described the jinn as being constituted of smokeless fire. In modern language this description might be rendered in terms of some sort of energy, but God knows best the truth of the matter.

Historically, there have been various accounts given of some of the other characteristics of jinn. For example, in general, they are reported to have extremely long life times, measuring in hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years.

Moreover, jinn have the ability to assume a variety of visible forms, both human and non-human. However, under "normal" circumstances, jinn are invisible to human biological vision.

Jinn are said to have a variety of capabilities which human beings do not possess. For instance, jinn are described as being able to travel tremendous distances in a very, very short period of time.

Some jinn have been described as having a great ability for mimicry. On occasion, this ability is invoked in order to confuse human beings and trick the latter into believing they are dealing with the spirits of departed relatives or loved ones.

Despite the superiority of jinn to human beings in some areas, human beings are considered to have, in general, the greater potential for spiritual growth and attainment. Nevertheless, jinn do have a considerable spiritual potential, and some jinn even have taken initiation with certain Sufi masters.

Like human beings, jinn have a family life. In addition, and again like their human counterparts, there is a tribal system which orients the lives of jinn.

Some of these tribes are said to be quite fierce, aggressive and warlike. Other tribes are quite peaceful.

Jinn have developed legal and judicial frameworks. Furthermore, some Sufi masters have indicated there are occasions in which humans may

be tried for possible violations of the laws of the jinn. This may happen, for example, in the case of, say, the death of jinn at the hands of a human being.

As is the case with humans, some jinn are good and moral beings. On the other hand, there also are jinn who are not good and are immoral, as is the case with human beings as well.

Just as there are human beings who have learned certain occult techniques for capturing and controlling jinn in order for the latter to do the bidding of the former, so, too, there are jinn who use their powers and capacities to capture and control human beings. Moreover, just as there are great risks for human beings who become involved in these kinds of activity, there also are great risks for those jinn who bother human beings.

In the case of human beings, different Sufi masters have described the personal and family lives of those people who succeed in learning how to capture and control jinn as being miserable and under constant threat of retaliation from, and destruction by, jinn. In one way or another, human beings who become preoccupied with, and entangled in, occult manipulation of various members of the jinn, lose control of their own lives. For the sake of a few occult tricks and marvels, everything important in life is lost to these people.

One of the risks run by jinn, when they decide to bother human beings, is the intervention of either Sufi masters or the properly trained devotees of these spiritual guides. There are a standard set of sequential, spiritual steps which can be taken to force jinn to cease and desist their activities in relation to human beings.

In a sense, the aforementioned sequence of steps are graduated escalations of the level of intensity of spiritual means used to force the offending jinn to vacate, so to speak, the premises of a given human being. Some jinn leave after only the first step or two. Other jinn require the full sequence of treatment stages before these recalcitrant, often very powerful, jinn can be induced to leave.

Sometimes, jinn will have its own occult chants to perform in order to try to countervail the spiritual methods brought against such a jinn. In fact, these jinn, on occasion, may induce the human being whom is bothered, or people close to this human being, to engage in those chants in order to enhance its "staying power".

If necessary, and as indicated in the foregoing, a Sufi shaykh may assist people, whether initiates of the Sufi path or not, who are being bothered by jinn. On the whole, however, Sufi guides try to avoid this for a variety of reasons.

Ridding people of jinn is not their primary responsibility. They are here to provide spiritual guidance to those interested in pursuing the Sufi path.

A great many people (far, far more than most people might suppose), both east and west, as well as north and south, are bothered, to varying degrees of severity, by jinn. Consequently, when the general public comes to know of a given individual's capacity to deal with wayward jinn, then that person's life often becomes consumed by the needs of people for this kind of treatment. These people, if they are spiritual guides, then have no time left to do what they ought to be doing with respect to providing guidance for those who are seeking it.

There have been instances reported by some Sufi masters in which there has been an orchestrated scheme perpetrated by a group of jinn against certain spiritual guides. Such jinn have tried to keep these guides busy with helping people being bothered so that these shaykhs would not be able to fulfill their primary mission of attending to matters directly connected with the Sufi path.

Many individuals that wish to become initiated in a Sufi Order come to the Sufi master with a jinn problem. Such people may have been unaware for the most part that they suffered from such a malady.

On the other hand, they may have been aware they had some kind of problem. Yet, they did not recognize the true character of the difficulty, attributing it to some sort of psychological or emotional problem.

Most spiritual guides will provide initiates with recitations and/or chants to do in order to protect them against unwanted intrusions by mischief-seeking members of the jinn. In addition, the shaykhs may quietly set about doing various things to spiritually help the individual be rid of his or her jinn problem without necessarily letting the person know what is going on and, therefore, alarming or frightening the individual.

Sometimes, when a person who is being bothered by a jinn comes to the shaykh, being in the presence of the shaykh will make the person feel physically ill or the person's mind will become clogged with all manner of

emotional and psychological pressure to run away from the shaykh. Such people often wrongly attribute this reaction to the "evil" nature of the spiritual guide.

In reality, what has happened is the following. The "dormant" jinn became agitated in the vicinity of the shaykh's spirituality. The jinn, for whatever reason, cannot escape or is not permitted to escape or does not wish to release control of the individual being bothered.

Consequently, the jinn will try to induce the individual being bothered to leave the presence of the shaykh. This is done, as outlined earlier, either through making the individual feel very ill, or through some kind of emotional or psychological pressure.

The person being pressured in this way never may have experienced this sort of intense, negative effect previously. The first time it happens, the individual being bothered may consider it to be coincidental to meeting with the Sufi shaykh.

Nonetheless, if the same kind of experience should recur over the course of several more meetings with the shaykh, the individual may associate the negative aspects of this condition with the presence of the shaykh. Many people, unfortunately, who undergo these experiences, jump to incorrect conclusions, blaming the spiritual guide for the pain and misery which is being experienced.

The spiritual guide has not done anything. The guide is just being herself or himself.

Instead, the trapped jinn is reacting violently to the spiritual reality of the guide. The effect of this spiritual presence is extremely disagreeable to the problem-causing jinn.

Among the jinn who choose to create havoc and difficulty in the lives of human beings, is one known as Iblis ... or, in English, Satan. Satan is one of the chiefs of a tribe of jinn.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, before human beings existed, jinn were in existence. Jinn were inhabitants of the Earth before human beings came into existence on this planet.

Satan was one of the jinn who had been deeply engaged in the worship of God for hundreds of thousands of years prior to the appearance of human beings. The spiritual attainment of Satan was such that he was permitted by God to associate with the angels. Moreover, he even was

allowed to teach some of the angels aspects of spirituality of which the latter had been given no previous knowledge by God.

According to Sufi masters, angels are expressions of pure spiritual light. Different kinds of angel are manifestations of various gradations of such light.

However, there are two characteristics held in common by all angels, whatever their rank. First, because of their spiritual nature, they are incapable of anything other than submitting to the will of God. Secondly, although angels are very spiritual beings, they have no capacity for spiritual growth, since this kind of growth depends, in part, on the dynamics of the struggle which accompanies the exercise of choosing between good and evil.

Consequently, when Satan disobeyed God's command to prostrate himself before the newly created Divine vicegerent of creation (i.e., the spiritually realized human being) he fell from grace as a jinn who had associated with the angels and not as a fallen angel. From the perspective of Sufi masters, the notion of "fallen angel" is an oxymoron since it alleges that an angelic being that is incapable, by nature, of doing other than the will of God has somehow violated its nature.

One of the reasons cited for Satan's fall from grace involves the intention underlying the aforementioned refusal of Satan to obey the Divine command. Satan believed he, as a jinn, was better than any human being, whether spiritually realized or not.

Therefore, pride was the downfall of Satan. Indeed, Satan becomes a warning sign to practitioners of the Sufi path of what can happen to spiritual wayfarers should pride, of any kind, become an obstacle to obeying the command of God.

After falling from grace, Satan sought God's permission for a respite from final judgment. Satan further declared he would use this period to seduce human beings away from the journey to God.

God granted Satan his wish. However, God told Satan he would be unable to dissuade any human being from the path to God except those human beings who first gave permission to Satan to have this sort of power over them.

Among Sufi masters, there is a saying. A person that would step onto the mystical path without being properly initiated by an authentic shaykh has Satan or Iblis as his or her "spiritual' guide.

God has warned human beings, again and again, Satan and his acolytes are an avowed enemy to us. The only enemy we have who is more of a danger to us than Satan is our own ego or false self.



## **Chapter 30**

### **Annihilation**

Like nature, human beings seem to have an inherent abhorrence of a vacuum. The very notion of nothingness begs to be filled with something, anything. This is especially true when it comes to the existence of the ego.

When mystics talk about the death or annihilation of the ego, many of us feel a strong visceral resistance to this prospect. After all, if one sucks the ego from our being, wouldn't this be sort of like a vacuum? As such, there would appear to be nothing left behind...just a form containing empty space.

Such a state of affairs tends to strike us as being very unnatural, if not highly unstable. If one should try to remove the ego, the inclination of the ego is to diffuse—violently, if necessary—back into the area from which it has been removed. The ego abhors a vacuum.

The business of the ego is to perpetuate itself. It has no value, properties, qualities, talents or capacities other than this.

The ego is the essence of what is meant by having a vested interest. However, the interests of the ego do not extend beyond its desire for continued existence, no matter what the costs of such continuation may be.

The ego is the original prototype after which most, perhaps all, lobbying groups are modeled. With single-minded determination, the ego advances its cause at every opportunity.

In fact, the ego doesn't wait for opportunities to arise. It generates its own opportunities by perceiving everything which happens as having ramifications for, and impact on, its interests.

The ego floods consciousness with a constant barrage of ads which advocate the inalienable right of the ego to have its interests served under all circumstances. The ego bullies, bribes, argues with, persuades, seduces, harasses, entices, conspires against, undermines, terrorizes, and "reasons" with whatever is seen as not being with the program. Spin doctors speak in hushed tones of reverence and respect when ego walks among them.

The ego holds the original patent application on negative campaigning. The ego is in its element with whisper campaigns, dirty tricks and character assassinations.

When the ego first heard distant rumors about the nature of the mystical tradition, it went into a violent rage of near apoplectic proportions. The mother and father of all evils had been identified.

This was war to the death. As far as the ego was concerned, the mystical path was a threat to all that was good and decent and proper.

Mystics were, at best, solipsists, and, at worst, were nihilists. Mystics were anarchists bent on destroying the very foundations on which civilization as we know it is built: namely, the ego.

For the ego, the negation of the ego is tantamount to the annihilation of existence itself. After all, without the ego, how could there be: war or famine or inhumanity or blind ambition or all manner of abuses (other-directed and self-directed) or political corruption or ecological genocide. All the things that make life interesting, meaningful and worth living for the ego would be doomed if those crazed mystics got their way.

Mystical annihilation is about the removal of the primary obstacle between our essential selves and the Divine presence. Mystical annihilation is about exposing the three-card monte scam being run by the ego.

Mystical annihilation is about the replacing of: illusion with reality; falsehood with truth; injustice with justice; aimlessness with purpose; ignominy with integrity, and malice with love. By absencing oneself from the false self (i.e., the ego), one becomes present to the true self (i.e., one's essential rootedness in Divinity).

Like mystical counterparts to Pauli's exclusion principle, the true self and the false self cannot both be in the same "space" of consciousness at the same time. As long as the ego continues to assert and manifest itself, the true self cannot be given expression.

In short, either the ego annihilates all traces of the true self, or the true self must annihilate all traces of the false self. From the perspective of practitioners of the Sufi path, there is no middle ground or compromise which is possible.

Despite all the ignoble tendencies of the ego, the guides of the Sufi path do indicate the ego, in a roundabout sort of way, serves a constructive function. The struggle between the true self and the false self is the engine which helps drive spiritual progress. Spiritual growth is built around a form of isometric exercise in which benefits can accrue from the tension of opposing forces.

Sufi masters know how to help each individual to arrange his or her spiritual isometric training program. They know what a person can tolerate at any particular stage of the program.

In addition, the Sufi master has insight into the capacity of the individual for spiritual realization. As a result, the Sufi teacher understands what is possible, as well as what is necessary to permit the developmental process to unfold in the most efficacious manner.

However, as is true with any kind of training discipline, the trainer cannot do the training for the person who wants to get into spiritual shape. Consequently, on the Sufi path, much depends on the sincerity of the spiritual aspiration of the person undertaking the training program.

The relation between effort and spiritually beneficial results is a correlation, not a causal relationship. The success of one's efforts rests entirely with the pleasure of God.

As such, one's efforts do not cause spiritual progress, nor is God under any obligation to reward one's struggles. Nevertheless, efforts are necessary, and, historically, there is an extremely strong correlation between those who struggle sincerely in opposition to the ego's attempts to perpetuate its existence, and spiritually beneficial results.

Sufi masters also indicate that, in actuality, the capacities out of which the ego arises are never really annihilated. Instead, at a certain point along the spiritual path, such capacities are transformed from antagonists to allies in the spiritual quest. Properties which formerly were adversarial in nature to the essential self enter into service of that self rather than give expression to the false self.

Therefore, in one sense, if the individual, through the blessings of God, should be successful in his or her spiritual pursuits to realize the true self, something is annihilated on the mystical path. What is annihilated is the tendency to oppose and undermine the spiritual journey.

What is left after such annihilation is not a vacuum, nor is it nothing. In fact, when the nihilism and anarchistic tendencies of the false self have been

removed through transformation, what remains is realization of the fullness of Being.

## **Chapter 31**

### **Keys**

There is not one right way to seek God, but every way one tries must be right. Every right way is a key which unlocks one or another spiritual door. Every incorrect way places further locks and doors between the individual and successful completion of the spiritual quest.

Sometimes, when people begin to reflect on the potential length and difficulty of the mystical path, there is a tendency for the individual to become overwhelmed. One tries to comprehend all the struggles and sacrifices that will be necessary, and one starts to feel fainthearted and queasy.

The idea of spiritual realization seems so close and palpable, but the ontological or experiential realization of this idea feels so far away. One goes through cycles of excitement and being deeply discouraged.

An important key to maintaining perspective through these early ups and downs is to understand that mysticism is a journey which goes at its own unique speed for each individual. However, irrespective of its speed, in one form or another, it will last a lifetime.

Like biological, emotional and intellectual maturation, mystical development takes time. Although various spiritual transformations may take place very rapidly when they do occur, these transformations must be preceded by certain stages and processes which prepare the individual for those changes.

Spiritual transformations -- taken in and of themselves -- can take place very rapidly. Sustainable spiritual transformations are another matter.

Due to our impatience to reach the destination, we want to hook ourselves up to a powerful spiritual booster and blast off. We tend to forget even astronauts go through an extensive training process in order to minimize the risks associated with their journey and in order to prepare themselves for the tasks which must be performed once in orbit.

Consonant with, and complementary to, the foregoing is the importance of pacing oneself on the spiritual path. This is another key to having proper perspective concerning the mystical journey.

Ironically, sometimes both the false self and satanic forces will urge one to jump into mystical practice in a big, enthusiastic way. There is a method to this apparent madness.

When these 'heroic' efforts don't produce the desired results, as they cannot since the underlying intention is incorrect, people become disillusioned, disappointed and frustrated. They become mystical burnouts.

The key to pacing is balance. One, simultaneously, must engage in some level of constant spiritual activity in order not to stagnate on the path, yet, the degree of this activity must not be so intense it cannot be sustained over time and, thereby, lead to a waning of interest or disengagement from the Sufi path.

Whenever the individual raises the level of intensity of her or his spiritual efforts, Sufi masters often suggest these efforts be coordinated within a context of less intense, but steady spiritual activity. Moreover, both the more intense, as well as the less intense, forms of spiritual activity need to be interspersed with brief periods of relaxation to keep one, in a sense, loose and fresh for the spiritual tasks at hand.

Every stage of the mystical journey provides keys for subsequent stages of that journey. These keys come in the form of the myriad learning experiences which take place in our day-to-day lives.

Sufi masters point out that our whole life is made up of a chain of experiential events. Those events are not chance, arbitrary happenings.

Each and every link of the chain is fully intended by God. Each and every event has something to teach us about our relationship with God.

Every experiential lesson is a key, or forms part of a more complex key, which can help unlock the meaning of our lives. The spiritual lessons we learn today may help, God willing, open doors along the mystical path tomorrow.

Conversely, inattention concerning these lessons has the potential to create spiritual difficulties later on in our journey. Indeed, one of the reasons why we sometimes tend to run into the same sort of problems in our lives is because we didn't take advantage of all the previous opportunities God had given us to learn the spiritual lessons of life.

Every day, God introduces events into our lives which require patience, forbearance, forgiveness, courage, sincerity, charitableness, honesty, perseverance, trust, generosity, compassion, kindness, sensitivity, and humility. Each time we are, for example, patient we help fashion, by the grace of God, a key of patience. Each time we have forbearance, then, by the grace of God, we help fashion a key of forbearance, and so on.

The events of our day-to-day lives provide opportunities for the fashioning of temporary spiritual keys which help resolve, God willing, the immediate problems of our lives. Over time and with God's help, what is temporary becomes permanent.

We become patience. We become forbearance. We become forgiveness. Such qualities are very important keys to unlocking, as well as giving expression to, our spiritual potential.

Sufi masters encourage practitioners of the path to seek to work toward fashioning as many of these permanent keys as we can. All of these qualities are correct ways of seeking God because they all reflect Divinity and are not possible to acquire except through God's blessings.

God wishes our spiritual success. The fact there are so many opportunities in our lives for fashioning the spiritual keys which, God willing, unlock the treasure house of Divine favor is a clear sign of God's good wishes for our spiritual well-being.

Sufi masters are constantly encouraging initiates to try to find as many ways as possible for seeking and working toward acquiring, spiritual keys of one kind or another. One simply doesn't know which key, or combination of keys, may be most pleasing to God.

Bearing witness to the Oneness of God is a key to spiritual success. Prayer is such a key. Fasting is this kind of key. Charitableness is a key. Remembrance of God is a key. Repentance is a key. Contemplation of God's signs, within us and without us, is a key. Good works are a key. Meditation is a key. Gratitude is a key. Dependence on God is a key. Love is a key.

No matter how many times one may fail in the pursuit of such spiritual keys, the Sufi masters urge initiates to try again and again and again. Persistence and perseverance are keys as well.

On the Sufi path, the master key is the shaykh. This is so because the spiritual guide is the means through whom one learns how to unlock the secrets of all the other spiritual keys.

The shaykh does not replace prayers or fasting or charitableness, and so on. Nonetheless, everything of value one learns about the meaning, significance, and reality of these spiritual activities comes through one's spiritual association with the shaykh.

Through the example and presence of the spiritual guide, one learns, God willing, about tolerance, love, kindness, mildness, justice, integrity, commitment, and piety. Through the support, protection, encouragement, and wisdom which God extends to the individual through the shaykh, one is enabled, if God wishes, to carry on amidst the difficulties, tests, trials and challenges of the mystical path.

The shaykh is the one who, by the grace of God, not only helps the individual to bring passions and anger into balance but, God willing, oversees the transformation of these protagonists into spiritual allies. Furthermore, the shaykh is the one who, with the support of God, helps the individual to: cleanse the heart, and empty the sirr of the world, and perfect the spirit.

The cleansing of the heart is a key to unlocking one's potential for gnosis of God. The emptying of the sirr (an internal, spiritual faculty) is a key to unlocking one's potential for witnessing the disclosures of God's manifestations. The perfection of the spirit is the key to unlocking one's potential for love of God.

For all of the foregoing reasons, as well as many others, the shaykh is the master key through which, by the grace of God, the doors to spiritual identity and essential capacity become unlocked. The shaykh is a master key because Divinity has fashioned her or him to have such a spiritual function.



## Chapter 32

### Ayats

Signs are the signatures which mark the presence of the dialectic of Divine Names and Attributes. Signs are the ephemeral traces of continuously novel manifestation of God's uniqueness.

Signs are the transitory forms that give expression to the Divine Will which is producing, scripting, staging and directing the passion play of existence. Signs are the visible waves of the Divine Ocean that come into being and, then, in accordance with the currents and eddies of the Unseen realm, disappear.

Signs exist within us. They are as plentiful as the molecules from which our bodies are fashioned and shaped.

Signs are manifested through the physiological and biochemical processes which set the parameters of our biological being. Signs are inherent in the various aspects of the immune system which differentiate self from non-self. Signs mark the stages of embryological unfolding. Signs are conducted through every neural impulse and muscle contraction.

Our capacity for consciousness, choice, language, rationality, creativity, emotion, and spirituality are all signs. Our tendencies toward rebellion, doubt, and selfishness are also signs, as are our potential for submission, certainty and love.

Signs exist everywhere in nature. The mineral, plant and animal realms are replete with signs. The sun, the moon, the stars, the heavens, and the earth each give expression to numerous signs.

There are signs manifest in realms beyond the physical/material universe. There are worlds no human eye has seen, nor mind conceived, yet which are, nonetheless, signs. There are many different "species" of angels, each giving expression to particular signs. There are signs of the Unseen.

Signs are one of the ways in which God communicates with Creation. Different signs address different dimensions and levels of being.

Signs are appropriate objects of contemplation. Signs provide material for reflection. Signs have meaning, significance, purpose and value.

Signs place things in perspective. Signs give evidence of God's love, compassion, generosity, patience, power, transcendence, nearness, mercy, kindness, justice, richness, subtlety and independence.

Signs are indices of God's gifts and favors. Signs reflect Divine warnings.

Signs offer us hope, as well as give us reason to fear. Signs are about the future and the past and the present.

Signs existed for millions of years prior to the current "Information Age". Signs were being decoded long before the emergence of algorithms, semiotics and hermeneutics. Signs were when time was not.

Signs are mysteries to be unraveled. Signs are clues to the nature of existence. Signs are problems to be solved.

Signs are maps that point the way to essential identity. Signs are keys to purpose and meaning. Signs provide a forum for exercises in humility.

Signs are veils that both conceal and disclose the reality of things. Signs live in what can be said as well as what cannot be said.

Within us are different instruments for engaging different kinds of signs. The language of mathematics is one kind of instrument for, among other things, examining some of the signs of nature. However, not all signs are capable of being fit into the structures and functions of mathematics.

There are signs which can be detected through various kinds of scientific instruments but which we are not yet able to capture in mathematical language. On the other hand, not all signs can be seen through microscopes or telescopes or particle detectors and so on.

The language of dreams is another kind of instrument for exploring some of the signs which manifest themselves during the state of sleep. Such signs, when properly understood, can provide deep insight into our spiritual condition and the nature of our lives.

There are other spiritual instruments within us which are capable of carrying us beyond the realm of the signs of the world of dreams. These spiritual instruments can, with God's blessings, allow the individual to have access to the significance(s) of many different kinds of sign on many different levels of existence.

The Sufi is someone who has undertaken a journey to explore, study, and try to understand the meaning and function of signs in the context of

human existence. The Sufi is someone who seeks to merge horizons with the character or nature of signs to whatever extent one's capacity and God permit.

The Sufi is an individual who wishes to know what is entailed by the significance of signs on different levels. A Sufi also wishes to incorporate such knowledge into his or her life in a way that will constructively shape, color and orient behavior.



## Chapter 33

### Kun

God only has to say to a thing: "Kun! (Be)", and it becomes. The Sufi masters indicate the `thing' to which the command `to be' is given belongs to the realm of Lahut or fixed forms.

Fixed forms have no being per se. Nonetheless, they are not nothing. They are non-existent potentials of Divinity's capacity for infinitely creative imagination.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, God does not create ex nihilo or from nothing. Creation always comes through the infinite fixed form potentials of the realm of Lahut.

The non-existent potentials of God's creative imagination cry out to Divine essence to be brought into existence, to be given the robes of ontological reality. The Divine quality of Rahman or Compassion responds to these cries and, in a sense, gives being to the non-existent potentials.

However, Sufi masters are quite clear that, in point of fact, fixed forms never leave their state of non-existence. God qualifies or modulates the Divine Attribute of Being to reflect the archetype or blueprint, so to speak, of the fixed-form potential.

Additional Divine Attributes such as: Consciousness, Will, Light, Hearing, Seeing and Speech are "added" to Being. Each of these Divine Attributes is shaped, colored, oriented and modulated by Divinity in accordance with what is called for by the "recipe" of the capacity of a given fixed form potential.

Consequently, what actually has reality is Divinity. The forms assumed through Divine manifestation reflect various aspects of the capacity of the fixed forms.

The non-existent potentials remain non-existent. Yet, God has provided these potentials with an indirect mode of reflected participation in the realm of ontology or being. In a sense, capacity is a sort of index of the degree to which a given fixed form can be reflected through different dimensions of Divinity. The greater the capacity of a fixed form, the greater is the array of Divine Attributes which, potentially, can be brought into play, so to speak, under appropriate conditions.

According to Sufi masters, the fixed forms known as human beings have the greatest potential capacity among "created" things for bringing into reflected play all the Names and Attributes of God. However, potential is one thing, and realization of that potential is quite something else.

Moreover, not all fixed form humans have the same degree of potential capacity to bring into reflected play all the Names and Attributes of God in the form of Divine manifestations. In other words, as members of a class of fixed form potentials, all human beings have, at least in some minimal fashion relative to other classes of fixed forms, the greatest potential capacity in the sense outlined previously. Nevertheless, within the general class of fixed form humans, there are individual differences of potential capacity from one fixed form human to the next.

Even after God says "Kun! (Be)" to a fixed form potential, not all aspects of the capacity of that fixed form potential are manifested right away. Different dimensions of such capacity are given expression through Divine manifestation over time.

According to Sufi masters, once a fixed form potential is, so to speak, called into being by the command of "Kun!", all the various possibilities within a given fixed form capacity cry out to be reflected in manifested reality. In the fixed form capacity of human beings, there are both spiritual and non-spiritual possibilities which are seeking expression.

What ensues is a dialectic ... both among the possibilities of fixed form potential which constitute the breadth and scope of human capacity, as well as between individual human capacity and Divinity. Different aspects of our human fixed form capacity (e.g., false self, mind, heart, spirit) begin to vie with one another for intentional control of what God is being called upon to bring into the mirror of Divinely manifested reality.

The above mentioned dialectic is a spiritual 'journey of return'. We, metaphorically speaking, come from non-existence, and we return to this condition of non-existence. The landscape which "separates" the start of the journey from its final termination, and through which we travel, is our life experiences.

In reality, as far as our fixed form potential is concerned, there is no departure, and there is no arrival back at our point of origin. We are now where we always have been and always will be.

Everything which occurs, occurs through the realm of Divine manifestation. In one way or another, whether through illusion or through truth, we are intentional, albeit indirect, witnesses to these realities.

Sufi masters stipulate that, taken collectively, all fixed form potentials, both human and non-human, are possibilities inherent in the capacity of the universal soul of a macrocosmic spiritual principle which gives expression to the Divine Name of Rahman (compassion). The reality to which this Name, Rahman, alludes encompasses all of the Divine Names except for the all-inclusive Name of essence: Allah.

Consequently, according to practitioners of the Sufi way, when God says: "Kun! (Be)" this command is directed to the collective capacities of the universal soul inherent in the macrocosmic principle rooted in the Divine Name Rahman.

When the fixed form 'universal soul' comes, in a manner of speaking, into being through Divine manifestations, all created particulars are microcosmic expressions of the fixed form potential of the underlying universal soul. In turn, the universal soul is an expression of the microcosmic principle inherent in the Divine Name Rahman.

Therefore, from the perspective of the Sufi masters, we are linked with all of creation through our collective membership in the capacity of the universal soul. Furthermore, all prophets, saints, and spiritual guides are fixed form variations on one underlying macrocosmic principle inherent in the Reality of the Divine Name of Rahman.

This is the hidden, spiritual treasure which is being "brought forth" by God through creation. Our true identity is embedded in this hidden spiritual treasure.

The purpose of our 'journey of return' is to be given an opportunity to realize, according to our individual capacities, a conscious participation, of sorts, in the significance, nature, value, beauty, joy, majesty, love and so on, ad infinitum, inherent in the aforementioned hidden, spiritual treasure.





## Chapter 34

### Hope

When Sufi masters speak about hope, they are not referring to a condition of merely longing for something to be the case. Hope which is not rooted in a foundation of struggle, work and sacrifice is nothing but an idle fantasy.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, hope gives expression to a certain kind of working relationship with God. On the one hand, as indicated above, hope cannot exist in a context devoid of the individual's spiritual efforts. We must seek out, and strive for, God in a sincere fashion.

Our struggle in this respect must be persistent. We should not be stingy in either the personal or material resources we expend on this undertaking.

On the other hand, we must have a very clear understanding that our efforts, in and of themselves, are not enough. If our spiritual hope lies in our abilities and possessions we are sadly deluding ourselves.

Practitioners of the Sufi path maintain that what comes to us from God is far more important than what goes to God from us. Effort, struggle and sacrifice are merely sincere signs of our working relationship of hope with God.

Besides our efforts, the essence of hope is a trust or confidence in God. Sufi masters indicate we must have confidence God did not create us arbitrarily or as a whim or as part of some game. We must have confidence God created each of us for a spiritual purpose.

To be confident our existence has spiritual meaning and value, is to invest hope in our relationship with God. Among other things, this means there are reasons for our struggling toward God.

Sufi masters maintain God wishes to be known by us. They stipulate that although God will always know us, God especially would like to know us when we are in the condition of knowing Divinity.

The shaykhs of the Sufi path indicate God wishes to be loved by us. They point out that while God always will love us, God especially would like to love us when we are in the condition of loving Divinity.

Practitioners of the mystical path note that God wishes to be served by us. They specify that even though God always will provide for us, God

especially would like to provide for us when we are in the condition of serving Divinity.

Sufi masters contend each of us has a unique capacity for knowing, loving and serving God. By realizing the purpose of our life, we realize the unique potential which God has intended for us.

In a sense, God is investing hope in us, just as we are investing hope in God. More specifically, God has provided each of us with a unique spiritual potential. On the basis of this potential, God hopes we will struggle to realize its value.

God trusts us and places confidence in us to do the right thing with respect to our spiritual potential. The right thing is to trust in God to help us realize the secrets and value of our spiritual potential in the way in which God intended should be the case.

Sufi masters indicate we must have confidence God is busy with the work of providing us with everything necessary to help us free ourselves from our ego and, thereby, help us realize our essential identities. We must have confidence God already is doing what needs to be done in this respect, even before we have done our part.

We must have confidence God wants us to succeed in the purpose of life. We are the ones who fail God in this process. God never fails us.

The ups and downs of life, the contractions and expansions, the pains and pleasures, the satisfactions and frustrations, the guidance and ignorance, the light and darkness, the veiling and the unveilings, the giving and the taking away, as well as the success and failures of life, are all loci of manifestation of God's Names and Attributes.

They are all part of the spiritual curriculum of Divinity with which we must struggle in order, hopefully, to reflect on, contemplate, learn, remember and implement the spiritual lessons of life.

In providing us with the aforementioned curriculum, God's hope for us is that we come to understand: (a) we have never been away from Divinity, despite appearances to the contrary; and, (b) Divinity has never been away from us.

God's hope for us is that we come to realize: (a) we constantly have been meeting with God all of our lives through the forms of the different Names and Attributes through which God relates to us in our day-to-day lives; and, (b) all of these meetings have been arranged for our spiritual

benefit. God's hope for us is that we will return to Divinity well pleased by -- and well-pleasing to -- God.

The books of revelation sent to us by God, as well as the prophets, saints and spiritual guides provided for us by God, are all signs of, so to speak, bilateral hope. On the one hand, God hopes we will take advantage of the guidance being offered through these different modalities of Divine assistance in order to realize our essential purpose for being. On the other hand, we can hope guidance is being extended to us as an expression of the Divine wish for us to permit our lives to be transformed in a manner which actively and accurately would reflect God's hope for us.

Our hope is nourished by God's Compassion, Beneficence, Mercy, Forbearance, Forgiveness, Love, Kindness, Strength, and Protection. Our hope is sustained by the many opportunities God gives us to move toward Divinity.

Our hope is activated by the manner in which God encourages us to have pure, sincere intentions toward Divinity. Our hope is decorated when God grants us good actions with which to clothe our naked intentions.

Our hope is given tensile strength by the way God calls us to task in this life while we still have time to work on correcting our weaknesses. Our hope is raised up in spiritual flight when God grants us spiritual states and stations of nearness in response to our hope.



## Chapter 35

### Evil

From the perspective of practitioners of the Sufi path, how might one characterize evil? Evil takes flight on the wings of intention.

Evil is an artificial environment designed and built by human beings. Evil is an illusion created by the absence of perspective.

Evil is relative but in a very absolute sort of way. Evil exploits and is itself exploited.

Evil is a color lent to events by human beings while we serve as loci of manifestation through which those events are given expression. Evil is a value added tax levied by humans against all of creation.

Evil is evidence that the exercise of choice is not an idle, philosophical exercise. Evil is the force of opposition necessary for spiritual development.

For thousands of years, the problem of evil has been perched on the tree of life, like a vulture. Human beings have been searching for an answer to why the problem exists at all.

Oddly enough, this problem makes more sense, in an inexplicable kind of way, if one were to suppose there is no God. Under these circumstances, although the consequences of evil are, well, just as evil, one could accept it as merely the down side to the chance events through which our existence supposedly has come into being. From this point of view, evil is a bit of bad luck in the way the dice of physics, chemistry and biology rolled.

The problem of evil becomes more complicated when God is present. Indeed, one of the arguments used by some atheists and agnostics is based on a syllogism involving the implications of evil for the existence of God.

This argument goes something as follows. (1) A loving God would not permit evil to exist. (2) Evil exists. (3) Therefore, either (a) God does not exist, or (b) God exists, but God is not a loving being. (4) If (b) is the case, then God is not worthy of our worship.

There are a number of assumptions in the foregoing argument which are not necessarily true but which are being treated as a priori truths. The first premise assumes we know what being a loving God involves. This premise also presumes to know what a loving God would and would not permit.

The second premise assumes everyone is agreed on what constitutes evil. In addition, this premise presupposes that to whatever extent evil exists God must be held accountable for its existence. Moreover, the second premise assumes everyone is agreed on the precise structural character to which evil gives expression.

Is the existence of evil absolute? Is its existence limited? Is the existence of evil relative in some sense, and, if so, in what sense is it relative?

The foregoing argument also tends to be reductionistic in character. It presupposes the only quality of Divinity is love.

Qualities such as, to name but a few, justice, transcendence, subtlety, independence, purpose, and order are not considered. No discussion takes place about how such qualities might play off against, or co-operate with, the quality of love or with what ramifications.

Sufi masters indicate God has made clear, on many occasions and in many circumstances, that God does no injustice to humanity or any aspect of creation. Human beings, however, love to prejudge situations before all the facts are in. We have a predilection for making judgments and decisions out of presumption, assumption and ignorance.

Human beings tend to be both repelled and attracted by the thought we should have no capacity for free will. We are repelled because the absence of free will seems to throw into question our integrity, identity and ultimate worth in the scheme of things.

We are attracted to the possibility all our actions are determined because this would seem to give us *carte blanche*, so to speak, to "permit" the ego to do its thing while we bear passive witness with a sense of horrified glee. We don't have to assume responsibility for the tab we run up in life.

We demand from God the right to choice. We are given choice.

Time and time again, we are warned by God in explicit detail, both through sacred texts and through spiritually inspired personalities, about the dangers surrounding the responsibility of choice. We are informed about the purpose and function of choice. The parameters of possible consequences of choice are spelled out.

We are heedless of those warnings and directives. We exercise said choice. Some of our choices are corrupted by the intentions which

underwrite those choices. As a result, we introduce various shapes and forms of evil into the world.

We condemn God for the state of pollution generated by our repeated dumping of toxic intentions into the environment. We hold God to be criminally negligent for granting us choice in the first place.

We've got God right where we want: on the horns of a moral dilemma. God is wrong not to give us freedom of choice. God is wrong for giving us freedom of choice.

Such are the delights and sophistries of the ego when it starts working the angles. We want things both ways. We want choice when this state of affairs serves our purposes. We do not want responsibility when this does not serve our purposes.

We want God to be the one we can finger to take the fall when the going gets tough. How clever we humans are.

Did God know human beings would misuse the freedom given to them? Sufi masters say: "Yes". However, just as farmers can make use of manure to grow plants, so God knows the secret of using evil to grow spirituality. Something of the nature of this secret has been disclosed to practitioners of the Sufi way.

Evil plays its game. Evil does not understand the game it plays is merely a game within a larger game.

Unlike the game of evil, the larger game does not exist for either sport or for amusement. Unlike the game of evil, the larger game is not a matter of whim or arbitrariness.

There is a seriousness of purpose in the larger game which is absent from the intention with which evil plays its game. Evil does not understand it can do nothing other than serve the purposes of the larger game irrespective of its intentions to do otherwise.

Evil is not absolute. It is limited, relative and constrained within certain limits of possibility.

Whoever and whatever is unjustly touched by evil receives compensation from God. Sometimes the compensation is given in this life. Sometimes it is given in the next life. Sometimes it is given in both worlds.

God is not niggardly. The compensations and consolations which come from God are most generous and satisfying.

Evil is an artificial environment designed and built by human beings. Our egos are the architects of, and contractors for, this project.

Our egos are under the illusion these monuments will last forever. They will not. As history has clearly shown, all the monuments created by human beings have perished or are perishing.

This trend will not change in the future.

Evil is relative in an absolute way. Evil does generate misery, pain, devastation, and ugliness everywhere it manifests itself. The doing of evil has real consequences for both the victims and perpetrators of evil. These realities cannot be denied.

However, the manifestation of evil exists as a transitory phenomenon which is restricted to this world. Furthermore, within this world, its realities also are circumscribed in very determinate ways. Evil is relative to the absolute parameters set for it by Divinity.

By struggling with evil -- ours and that of others -- we have the opportunity for spiritual development. Evil generates the conflict, turmoil, tension, antagonism and opposition that set the stage on which the story of spirituality unfolds.

To set the stage in this way, to provide the necessary backdrop of tension against which the story line takes place, to provide the themes with which spirituality must struggle, is the function which evil serves. These are fundamental components in all good drama.



## Chapter 36

### Hal

Most of us believe we are, for the most part, in control of ourselves. This is not true.

Our lives consist of a series of states (hal) which vary over time and circumstance. Most of us have absolutely no control over when these states come or when they go.

If we examine what goes on in consciousness, there is a tremendous jumble of states tumbling over one another. This goes on from: moment to moment; hour to hour; day to day; month to month; and, year to year, throughout our lives. This phenomenon is so commonplace for most of us we tend not to think much about it.

Memories bubble to the surface which we have not been trying to remember. Memories which we try to recall are often not forthcoming, only to appear suddenly at some later time.

Emotions wash over consciousness like waves lapping on a shore. We are laughing, then we are serious, then we are angry, then we are calm, then we are agitated, then we are lonely, then we are expectant, then we are hopeful, then we are afraid, then we are bored, then we are depressed, then we are jealous, then we are excited, then we are sad, then we are proud, then we are arrogant, then we are ashamed, then we are friendly, then we are distant, then we are impatient, then we are sexually aroused, then we are annoyed, then we are crying, and then we are frustrated. Indeed, we ARE the emotions that course through us like an out of control roller coaster. As new emotions come, we are something different for the duration of that emotion, and, then, the next emotional identity descends upon us.

Similarly, we go through a variety of, what might be termed, mental orientations during the course of the day. For example, we may be curious, or we may be skeptical, or we may be interested, or we may be uncertain, or we may be indifferent, or we may be cautious, or we may be confident, or we may be vacillating, or we may be torn, or we may be certain.

Which of these mental orientations will be the case in any set of circumstances, often depends on our emotional state at the time. Thus, our interaction with one and the same individual on different occasions may be

suspicious or indifferent depending, respectively, on whether we are angry or bored.

The reality of the situation (in the foregoing case, whether we should have been angry or bored with the individual) is often secondary to our state of emotion and/or mental orientation. Furthermore, we often don't so much control the outcome of this dynamic, as much as we are recipients of a particular state which descends on us as a product of that bilateral dynamic between emotion and mental orientation.

Both of the foregoing kinds of states can be affected by the state of our body. Being sleepy, overtired, sick, physically uncomfortable, hungry, rested, cold, hot, constipated, and so on, can all affect our current emotional state or mental orientation, as well as induce new ones.

Every day we go through cycles in which our bodily state is changing from hour to hour, and sometimes even from moment to moment. These states not only affect emotional states and our mental orientation, but our bodily states, as well, can be affected by emotions and mental orientation. For example, we can be so interested in something that sleep and food are marginalized for a time. Alternatively, we may be so upset we can't eat or sleep.

In either case, we usually don't choose or control such states. They happen to us, and we can do little about it except to try to accommodate to them as best we can after the fact.

However, even our accommodations or responses frequently are thrust on us by a dynamic which is beyond our control. Habits, prejudices, attitudes and biases all predispose us to respond, or accommodate ourselves, in certain automatic ways.

In addition, we go through a series of motivational states during the course of a day. We approach some things, and we avoid others. We desire "x", then we desire "y", then we desire "z".

Our short-term goals and priorities often change from the beginning of the day to the end of the day. These changes are often a function of a dialectic which goes on among: motivational states; emotional states; mental orientation states and bodily states.

Moreover, very frequently, we do not choose what the end result of the foregoing dialectic is going to be. We let all the tumblers fall

into place and accommodate ourselves to whatever state the final combination unlocks.

On top of all of the foregoing states, numerous ideas, thoughts and reflections run through our consciousness from second to second. These are fleeting cognitive states over which we generally have no control.

Thoughts can modulate emotions, motivations, memories, bodily states and mental orientation. However, any, and all, of these other states can color, shape and modulated thought as well.

Every so often, we try to slow this whole process down and attempt to exert conscious control over the dialectic of states going on in awareness. Such concentration, however, can be very tiring.

Consequently, before we know it, we are back to a wild cascade of states rampaging through our consciousness. We may not even have been aware of the moment when we lost our concentration, suddenly 'awakening' in the middle of some state quite incidental to that on which we had been focusing.

Reveries and fantasies come and go without warning. Quite frequently, we slip in and out of these states, not out of choice, but because some other kind of state pushes us into, or out of, such states.

Many of our decisions and judgments are not made through a careful process of analysis of which we are in control from beginning to end. Instead, decisions and judgments often are generated as a function of whatever states are interacting at a given time.

Yet, we often don't have, or try to obtain, a great deal of control over what set of states will be playing off against one another at any given time. As a result, many of our decisions and judgments bear the colors and trace imprints of the biases and prejudices of the various states which are descending on us under such circumstances.

We are under the impression that because a given decision or judgment is in consciousness, therefore, we have been its willful architect. Unfortunately, more often than not, we are but passive witnesses to the proceedings.

For the most part, our states are generated for us. We do not choose our states.

For many of us, the ego is responsible for the vast majority of the states which we experience. The ego has its own inclinations, moods, attitudes, interests, capacities, motivations, mental orientations, and emotions.

The ego seeks to dominate consciousness. It does so, by flooding consciousness with its states.

The ego seeks to dominate processes of logic, interpretation and understanding. It accomplishes this, by coloring and shaping those processes according to the predilection of its different states.

The ego seeks to dominate behavioral pathways. It achieves this by entraining (through pressure, inducement, seduction and so on) motivational states to budget and distribute energy resources according to the goals, priorities and desires of the ego.

Many of the judgments, decisions, evaluations and conclusions which are generated in us are courtesy of the dialectic of ego states. Generally speaking, we do not appreciate how far beyond our control these processes are until we try to interfere with what is going on and change things in a direction contrary to the wishes of the ego.

For example, according to the practitioners of the Sufi path, within us, we have spiritual inclinations and capacities which also produce states. These states both appear in, and shape, consciousness, as well as, interact with understanding, motivation, bodily states, memory, and so on.

These spiritual states vie with the states of the ego for control of access to consciousness, thinking, and behavior. Sufi masters indicate the battleground in which this struggle takes place is the heart.

Depending on the winner, the heart will be oriented toward the inclinations of spirituality or toward the inclinations of the ego. The orientation of the heart, in turn, will influence, in a fundamental way, what sorts of states have access to consciousness, thinking and behavior.

When a spiritual state, such as a desire for guidance, arises, the ego will respond by, for example, laying down a barrage of emotional pressures. Thus, the individual in whom this is happening suddenly may feel, courtesy of the ego, bored or depressed or angry or skeptical or physically sick as a result of the presence of the spiritual state.

On the other hand, the ego may bring forth various states intended to influence motivational and behavioral pathways. For instance, one may

be interested in spiritual guidance because of the presence of certain spiritual states. Nonetheless, the ego will induce laziness or tiredness. Consequently, one won't have the energy to follow-up on one's interest in spirituality.

Alternatively, the ego may flood consciousness with various states of memory or fantasy or thought. These interfere with concentration and tend to distract the individual away from focusing on spiritual states currently taking place.

What happens at this point depends on a lot of other factors. Is there any guidance available? Are there any spiritual guides to whom the individual has access? What other spiritual states, such as sincerity, repentance, and so on, are there arising in the individual which would reinforce the other spiritual state? How entrenched is the regime of the ego in running affairs for the individual?

The spiritual guide is someone who, God willing, can assist the individual in the struggle of states involving the inclinations of the ego and the spirit. Moreover, the guidance and practices of the mystical path are designed to fortify the spiritual side and weaken the non-spiritual side in the struggle between the two.

Roughly speaking, making progress on the mystical path can be "measured" in relation to the changing balance of power between the influence of spiritual states and ego states. More specifically, the weaker the hold of ego states on consciousness, thinking and behavior, the more likely is it that spiritual states will be exerting a dominant influence on what is happening within the individual.

Normally speaking, the term "hal" is used by Sufi masters in conjunction with purely mystical states involving visions, dreams, flashes of intuition, unveilings and the like. However, although there always are exceptions to the rule, to whatever extent mystical states do occur in the individual, these will not take place until after there is a substantial shift in the predominance of various more "rudimentary" spiritual states, relative to the ego states which are still present.

Being able, by the grace of God, to control, or resist or dissolve the states of ego through the intervention of countervailing spiritual states, is a tremendous condition in which to be. Various mystical states, such as unveilings of one sort or another, may have played a role in bringing about this condition.

However, such mystical states are useless unless, God willing, the aforementioned control over the states of the ego has been realized. Consequently, irrespective of whether or not certain of the states usually thought of as mystical do occur, the spiritual states restraining or counteracting the effects of ego states are, in actuality, powerful mystical states which are very difficult to acquire.

## **Chapter 37**

### **Expansion**

Becoming initiated and stepping onto the mystical path is a very exciting time for an individual. It is a period of expansion.

The person feels exhilaration. One has started the most important journey of one's life. Perhaps, one feels a sense of direction, purpose and belonging which previously had been absent or marginalized in one's life.

Very likely, initiation has been the culmination of a fairly intense period of: uncertainty; wavering back and forth; doubt; anxiety; exploration; and, reflection. Somehow, whether by careful consideration or a feeling in one's heart or in some other way, one finally decides to commit oneself to the mystical path. One experiences a lifting of tension and a accompanying sigh of relief.

One can't wait to read about the path and talk with one's fellow travelers. One looks forward to spending time with the teacher and receiving instructions concerning practices.

One entertains the future with a mixture of anticipation and bewilderment. One doesn't know what to expect. One wonders when one will have a mystical experience and what it will be like.

One thinks about stories one has heard or read concerning the great mystics of the past. One marvels at their wisdom and wonderful moral qualities. One feels a degree of pride for being permitted entry to the same path on which they have been wayfarers.

Enthusiasm courses through one's body and mind. One tries not to miss anything which is said, or goes on around one, concerning the path.

This initial encounter with a species of expansion lasts various lengths of time for different people. For some, it lasts for a few days. For others, it lasts for a week or a month. For others, it lasts longer. Moreover, different people experience it to varying degrees of intensity.

Eventually, however, many of these feelings fade. One may still feel excited about, enthusiastic toward and happy with the decision to step onto the path and, finally, be underway on one's journey. Nonetheless, one's feelings in these respects do not remain as intense or as focused as

they had been earlier. The feelings are not as pervasive and constant as they had been. They are somewhat sporadic.

The problems of the world or with one's life begin to seep back into the center stage of one's consciousness. One's ego begins to create problems in a number of different ways. Doubts, questions and anxieties may begin to assert themselves.

One may be having difficulty in establishing a regular pattern in relation to one's spiritual work. Perhaps, one is encountering difficulty in freeing up time for the practices one has been given. One may be experiencing some sort of tension or resistance in relation to certain aspects of the path which are troubling to one.

One may begin to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the undertaking to which one has become committed. One may be confused by some of the teachings or wonder how they can be implemented in a feasible manner in modern society.

Now, one is experiencing a form of spiritual contraction. Everything seems difficult, frustrating, problematic, and somewhat of an unmanageable burden.

Before, during the experience of the expansionary aspects of initiation, everything kind of bubbled and flowed. Things seemed to come easily. Life was light and happy or pleasant.

In contraction, things appear to drag and have a heaviness about them. Events do not flow. They trickle and, maybe, not even that.

Everything seems to come with tension and conflict attached to it. One may feel somewhat alienated and out of sorts. One has to struggle.

These cycles of expansion and contraction will continue to occur on the Sufi path. They may change their modalities of manifestation as one makes, God willing, spiritual progress along the mystical path, but they are an important structural feature of the path.

When the heart is opened up, when one feels close to God, when one is gaining spiritual insights and understanding, when one embraces submission, and so on, then one experiences various kinds of happiness, joy, peace, and contentedness. These are expressions of spiritual expansion.

On the other hand, when, spiritually, one's heart feels closed down, when one feels far away from God, when one does not seem to be acquiring



any spiritual insight or understanding, and when one is struggling with one or more aspects of the process of submission, one experiences being down, separate, restless and uneasy. These are expressions of spiritual contraction.

Both expansion and contraction have much to teach one. In a sense, the lessons of contraction till the soil of the soul and heart and prepare them to receive the seeds of expansion so that the latter may grow.

The lessons of expansion, on the other hand, provide spiritual strength, sustenance and consolations. Through the spiritual support which comes, by the grace of God, from the experience of expansion, one is enabled to continue with the aspects of the spiritual journey involving the struggle and work of contraction.

The difficulties of contraction, in turn, will pave the way for further expansion. The tears of contraction will be exchanged for the tears of expansion. The tears of struggle will be transformed into the tears of joy and ecstasy.

Along the Sufi path there are many different stations. These stations deal with themes such as repentance, longing, patience, dependence, gratitude, and love, to name but a few.

When one is struggling with the challenges and trials peculiar to such stations, one goes through a form of contraction which is appropriate to that station. When, by the grace of God, one is opened up to the mysteries of such stations and becomes adorned in the qualities of those stations, one experiences a form of expansion which is consonant with those stations.

Some people are able, by the grace of God, to find peace, contentment and even happiness during periods of contraction. They have been given a deep rooted understanding that all things, including contraction, come from God.

Consequently, they are at peace with, and discover contentment in, the condition of contraction because it has been sent by their Lord especially for them and their spiritual progress. For them, contraction becomes a gift to be savored, appreciated and, yes, enjoyed.

Alternatively, by the grace of God, some people, while in a condition of spiritual expansion, nonetheless, feel a special form of contraction which has its own bliss and beauty. This species of contraction concerns the condition of being true servants of God. Although these people have been

raised to the highest spiritual realms, they humble themselves before God and do not have any desire other than to be the servants of Divinity.

Those who undergo this sort of "contraction" are extremely happy and well-satisfied with such a condition. They do not feel down or uneasy or restless. There is no heaviness or difficulty associated with it. There is no sense of its being a burden or a struggle. Those who enjoy this spiritual condition have found an essential kind of contentment and peace.

In fact their experience is characterized by all of the qualities of expansion. However, the people of this condition know they are the servants of God. They are not God in any essential way.

This distinction between Divinity and the servant is sometimes marginalized in certain conditions of expansion. Nonetheless, the distinction is always present, and it is absolute.

The placing of the above distinction at the center of consciousness, understanding and actions constitutes, relative to the transcendence of God, a contraction of sorts. The distinction between Divinity and servant indicates that no matter how great the spiritual expansion of an individual may be, it is insignificant in the context of God's incomparable greatness.

In many ways, distinctions between expansion and contraction tend to lose significance in these advanced mystical stations. Whatever may be the truth in relation to such stations these lofty spiritual heights are a long, long way from the point of departure at the time of initiation and one's initial taste of expansion.

## **Chapter 38**

### **Jamal/Jalal**

All the Names and Attributes of God fall under either one, or the other, of two broad qualitative ways of referring to Divine manifestation. More specifically, Divine manifestations are either qualities of: on the one hand, beauty, ease, mercy, forgiveness, love, joy, etc.; or, on the other hand, majesty, transcendence, retribution, power, independence, incomparability, etc..

The term "jamal" gives collective reference to the Divine qualities of beauty, as well as to other qualities which are, in a sense, grouped with beauty. Generally speaking, however, all of these qualities are subsumed under the rubric of beauty.

Consequently, whenever Divine qualities of jamal or beauty are being mentioned, tacit reference also is being made to all qualities which are grouped or associated with beauty. The series of qualities cited above in relation to beauty (e.g., ease, intimacy, mercy, and so on) is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Similarly, the term "jalal" encompasses all the Divine qualities associated with majesty. Moreover, once again, as was the case with the designation of jamal, the list of qualities associated with majesty in the foregoing (e.g. transcendence, retribution, independence and so on) are intended more as sort of guiding hints rather than a definitive account.

The Divine qualities of jamal (beauty) and jalal (majesty) describe different aspects of the way God relates to human beings and creation. In fact, the fabric of our lives is woven from "fibers" drawn from both categories of quality in accordance with the design of Divine will.

Most of us tend to find the qualities of jamal or beauty more agreeable than the qualities of jalal. In other words, as far as our relationship with God is concerned, we, for example, would prefer: ease rather than trials; forgiveness rather than retribution; joy rather than sadness; intimacy rather than "distance", and so on.

Yet, according to practitioners of the Sufi path, spiritual progress requires a mixture of both kinds of relationship. Indeed, one might liken the 'roles' of jamal and jalal in the Divine fashioning of human spirituality to a sort of forging process.

For instance, through experiencing God's care, kindness, grace, compassion, forbearance, support and so on, our hearts begin to soften in the warmth of the fires of love which God has kindled in our lives. God, then, sends trials, challenges, and hardships into our lives that become the hammer, by which, and anvil, on which, our softened, melted hearts are pounded to give this spiritual instrument strength and shape.

After this, our hearts are plunged into the cooling waters of Divine mercy. We are removed by God from the difficulties through which we were being tested and fashioned.

Once again, God casts us into the intense heat of Divine love through manifold favors and blessings. Our hearts respond and begin to melt.

Nevertheless, due to arrogance and pride, we may soon find ourselves on the anvil of ingratitude and forgetfulness. We are pounded about by the hammer of humiliation and chastisement.

The desire to repent arises in us. We cry out for the soothing waters of Divine forgiveness. God answers our plea.

Eventually, if God wishes, the spiritual forging process is completed. Our spiritual potential has been realized by the way in which God has related to us through various combinations and sequences of Divine qualities of *jamal* and *jalal*.

These qualities do not necessarily have to alternate in order to achieve the Divine purpose with respect to helping us to realize our spiritual potential. Sometimes, God relates to us through 'compassionate severity', in which qualities of *jamal* are being manifested more intensely than are qualities of *jalal*. On other occasions, God may relate to us through 'severe compassion', as qualities of majesty have ascendancy over qualities of beauty, although the latter qualities are active and present in various ways and degrees.

God brings into our lives unique combinations of beauty and majesty in order to provide each of us with the best opportunities for, if God wishes, making spiritual progress and realizing our essential capacity and identity. Whether or not we are inclined to try to take advantage of these opportunities is up to us.

Whatever the character of the events coming into our lives, whatever ratio of *jamal* and *jalal* to which these events give expression, Sufi masters encourage us to remember that the events (both

internal and external) of our lives are the media through which God is communicating with us. Moreover, this communication is not arbitrary, whimsical or a game.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, we will not realize our true identity and essential capacity until we have certain kinds of experience involving the majestic, rigorous and severe dimensions of Divinity. Experiencing only qualities of beauty will retard our spiritual development.

Consequently, Sufi masters indicate we should not look at the events of our lives as being either "good" or "bad". They all are manifestations of Divine relationship which are intended to help us spiritually.

We must come to recognize the presence of Divinity in our lives irrespective of the "disguise" through which Divinity appears. These manifestations may be: pleasant and/or painful; compassionate and/or severe; forgiving and/or exacting; expanding and/or contracting; imminent and/or transcendent; beautiful and/or terrible; life-giving and/or life-taking, and so on.

The ups and downs of life mirror the presence of *jamal* and *jalah* in our lives. These experiences are God's way of introducing us to the many dimensions of ourselves and of Divinity.

Through these experiences we learn about various facets and stages of our relationship with Divinity. Through these events God helps us learn, among other things, about: wisdom, justice, love, separation, ignorance, repentance, knowledge, light, doubt, darkness, guidance, forgiveness, jealousy, friendship, misguidance, enmity, courage, truth, sacrifice, worship, reality, creation, and identity.

According to Sufi masters, human beings alone, in all of creation, have been given the capacity to reflectively manifest all of the Names and Attributes of God. This means we have the potential, each according to her or his capacity, to reflect an array of Divine qualities of *jamal* and *jalah*.

According to the Sufi masters, realizing the purpose of life involves coming to terms with the reality and significance of Divine qualities of *jamal* and *jalah* in our daily lives. In other words, a spiritually successful life entails learning how to consciously utilize the qualities of *jamal* and *jalah*, to which our lives give expression, for the purposes of spiritual development and maturation.

In addition, the practitioners of the Sufi path contend we attain to proper worship of God only as we come to experientially recognize, embrace and cherish the Divine qualities of jamal and jalal present in the events of our lives as manifestations of one Divinity. Moreover, Sufi masters indicate we only will experience the Many as the One and the One as the Many when we have fully realized our own essential capacity for reflecting Divine qualities of jamal and jalal.

## Chapter 39

### Intention

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, no undertaking has spiritual value unless it satisfies four conditions. (a) The activity should begin with the intention of expressing service for, and love of, God. (b) The activity should be pursued with a willingness to struggle to do whatever one can to have the activity reflect, as far as possible, the original intention. (c) The activity should be terminated with the intention to direct all praise to God for the conclusion of the activity. (d) One should be prepared to accept whatever comes from the activity, irrespective of whether we deem the results to be "good" or "bad", as the will of God acting for our spiritual benefit and well-being.

Within each of us, there is a capacity which is extremely sensitive to a vast array of phenomena operating within, and around, us. This capacity gives expression to the character of the intention with which we engage any given activity. Intentionality colors and shapes everything we do.

The phenomena to which intentionality is sensitive are manifestations of Divine light. As that light passes through Creation, different spectral patterns of absorption and emission of Divine light are generated according to the capacity of each created thing to do so.

Within us are spectroscopic-like instruments (e.g., mind, emotions, heart, spirit, etc.) which register and analyze the spectral signatures of the things and events of life we encounter through our experiences. Intentionality is fed by, and sensitive to, the recordings and analyses of all these instruments.

In a sense, intentionality is sort of like a light-sensitive, interactive, film medium. In this respect, intentionality has two broad ranges of sensitivity.

One dimension of this sensitivity is phototropic. This aspect of intentionality will orient itself toward, or around, different sources of Divine light.

The other dimension of intentional sensitivity is photophobic. In other words, it will turn away from various manifestations of Divine light.

In order not to confuse spiritual issues with physical matters, the aforementioned properties of intentional sensitivity will not be designated as "phototropic" and "photophobic". The terms "nurtropic" and "nurphobic" will be used instead, since "nur" is the term used by Sufi masters to refer to the manifestations of Divine light.

The nurtropic range of intentional sensitivities is: drawn toward, seeks out, oriented by, informed through, and nurtured by spiritual light or nur. On the other hand, the nurphobic range of intentional sensitivities all are: drawn toward, seek out, oriented by, influenced through and sustained by darkness, ignorance, density, rebellion and the like.

Moreover, the nurphobic range of sensitivities is antagonistic to, and in conflict with, the nurtropic range of sensitivities. Our lives are marked by the interference patterns created by the interaction of these two manifestations of intentionality.

These nurtropic and nurphobic sensitivities seek to entrain choice to reflect their respective orientations. This has very important spiritual ramifications because intention is the fulcrum about which the heart turns.

More specifically, intention is the medium through which the heart's condition of faith is accessed by, and interacts with, the nurtropic and nurphobic tendencies within intentionality. Faith, in turn, is a force which gives expression to the sort of doubts and commitments we have as they shape, modulate and orient behavior.

Faith is colored by the dialectic of nurtropic and nurphobic sensitivities of intentionality. Our attitudes, priorities, goals, aims, values and so on are underwritten by the character of our faith -- irrespective of whether this is spiritual or non-spiritual in nature.

Whichever way the heart turns, is the direction in which we tend to travel. Consequently, when intention is entrained by either nurphobic or nurtropic sensitivities, or some combination thereof, the condition of the heart's faith will reflect this and so will our actions.

Intentionality gives expression to the exercise of free will. As such, free will becomes a matter of whether, on any given occasion, we align ourselves with the nurtropic or nurphobic dimensions of intentionality.

Nurtropic 'colored' intentions are inclined to the essential self. Nurphobic 'colored' intentions are oriented toward the false self conglomerate known as the ego.



The nurtropic dimensions of intentionality seek to align with the varied manifestations of nur or Divine light. Prophets, friends of God, spiritual guides, Divine revelations, worship, prayer, remembrance, submission, mystical unveilings, and Divinely inspired dreams are all examples of manifestations of Divine light.

On the other hand, nurphobic dimensions of intentionality are inclined to align with qualities of darkness, as well as shun manifestations of spiritual light. Satanic influences, rebellion against Divinity, the gratifications and entanglements of the world, forgetfulness of God, self-worship, destructive emotions, and addictions all give expression to the sort of qualities which attract our nurphobic intentional sensitivities.

Nurtropic tendencies within us invite sincerity of spiritual purpose, struggle and commitment. Nurphobic inclinations within us resist and reject such purposes, struggles and commitments.

Purification of our nurtropic capacities involves strengthening and intensifying the character of our inclination toward sincerity of spiritual purposes, struggles and commitments. This is accomplished through association with the various ways in which Divine light manifests itself. However, such association is especially valuable in conjunction with the spiritual guides who are heirs to certain facets of the duties of the Prophets.

Sincerity is indicated by one's willingness to detach oneself from: the ego; this present, physical world; and, the desire for paradise or heaven. Sincerity also is characterized by an absence of expectation concerning: reward, favor, gifts, states, stations or spiritual experiences, as a return on one's efforts. Finally, sincerity involves an increasing attachment to sacrifice for, love of, and humility before, God.

The more advanced stages of sincerity -- or the purification of intentionality -- entails an abandonment of any sense of sacrifice concerning one's commitment to God.

Pure sincerity is to turn over all aspects of intentionality to the will of God.

In effect, the individual who is immersed in these higher stages of sincere intention becomes like a superconductor of Divine will. In other words, the person offers no resistance, distortion or impediment to the transmission of Divine purpose.

The masters of the Sufi way indicate God looks to the character of our intention rather than to the nature of our actions. The reason for this is because many factors beyond our control may affect the character of an action, but intentions are within the purview of our control, and they do not lie.

Intentions are what they are. They reveal to God, very clearly, whether nurtropic or nurphobic inclinations are the dominant force in entraining the orientation of our hearts under any given set of circumstances.

## **Chapter 40**

### **Knowledge**

There are many kinds of conceptual systems which are considered to be knowledge. Most of these forms of "knowledge" may have no lasting or essential value.

For example, one can have knowledge of philosophy, and one can have a philosophy of knowledge. However, philosophy -- taken in and of itself -- does not necessarily constitute knowledge about anything.

Philosophy involves: methodologies, ideas, arguments, issues, problems, theories, reflections, values, critical analysis, imagination, intuition, reasoning, logic, systems, questions, and assumptions. For more than two thousand years, human beings have been combining these different constituent aspects of philosophy into countless conceptual packages—like widgets, of varied description, coming off an assembly line.

One may find these philosophical packages interesting and useful in various ways. One may derive meaning and purpose from such packages. One even may organize one's life around a particular philosophical package.

Whether any of these packages provide one with knowledge of the nature of a given dimension of reality or truth is as contentious an issue now as it was several thousand years ago. Whether any of these packages will permit one to really know who we are or what we are doing here is uncertain.

To know the ins and outs of philosophy requires a lifetime of dedicated study. In fact, one lifetime is probably not enough.

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of philosophical experts in areas involving: logic, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, history, education, mathematics, science, economics, psychology, politics, and law. Most of these topic areas can be broken down further into numerous sub-specialties.

None of these experts has expertise in all areas. In fact, most professional philosophers have only a passing acquaintance with any but a small handful of philosophical areas.

Thousands of books and articles are written every year in every one of these areas of philosophical specialty. No one human being, not even a

professional, can keep up with the mass of material which is being churned out.

Someone may read it. Someone may reflect on it. Someone may critically respond to it with additional books and articles. What it all means is anybody's guess.

What relation, if any, such material has to truth or knowledge is unknown to the vast majority of us and, perhaps, even to professional philosophers themselves. Indeed, one is faced with the following question. How much of one's life does one want to spend trying to find out if there is anything of lasting value in any of this material?

The story of philosophy repeats itself across the spectrum of disciplines. We have lots of theories, conventions, frameworks, principles, rules, methods, speculations, conjectures, ideas, systems and perspectives in physics, law, biology, economics, mathematics, history, literature, medicine, engineering, social sciences, and so on.

In almost all of these topical areas, there are facts, demonstrations, experimental results, proofs, confirmations, probabilities, and possibilities. In addition, there are unknowns, uncertainties, inconsistencies, anomalies, paradoxes and controversies.

Thousands of books and articles are published every year in many different languages in all of these subjects. For almost every position taken on any given issue, there are usually several counter positions.

Theories are constantly changing. Material is being updated on a daily basis. New technologies and instruments are being introduced. Ideas, methods and textbooks regularly become outdated.

How does the non-professional individual navigate her or his way through all of this? How can one speak of becoming an educated person when any given individual is ignorant of so much? Furthermore, even with respect to that in which we have become educated, what is it we really know?

Any one of these areas can totally consume an individual, and, yet, even a very brilliant, totally committed individual still would not have mastered all that can be learned in such areas. How long and how far should one pursue any of these areas to determine if they have any lasting

and essential knowledge concerning the reality of human beings and creation?

To complicate all of the foregoing, we really don't have a great deal of time in which to digest, reflect on, and evaluate any of the material to which we are exposed. Much of what is taught and learned is for purposes of getting a job which can pay enough money to keep us going. Each of us must economically justify our existence. Meaning, purpose, identity, justice and truth have, at best, only marginal importance in the commercial scheme of things.

Knowledge frequently is of value to the extent it can be exploited commercially. Education is valued, for the most part, because it serves the economic needs of government and business.

As long as we work and consume and pay taxes, neither business nor government really cares whether we ever come to realize our essential identity and capacity. They don't care what we know about ourselves, or anything else, as long as we know how to help them do, and get, what they want. Business and government are not interested in spirituality unless one can show them how it will enhance productivity and competitiveness or financially improve the bottom line.

The scary part in all of this is we are business, and we are government. We tend to call something "knowledge" for the jobs, money, consumption and gratifications it makes possible. For the most part, we want education to serve our economic interests and career needs.

We complain about the great need for values, meaning, purpose, justice, truth and identity in our lives. Yet, we are not prepared to let these qualities get in the way of the cycles of business, profit, ambition and success which are consuming our lives at a faster and faster rate of speed.

Is modern "knowledge" really helping us to come to terms with whom we are? Does modern "knowledge" even know who we are or what our essential capacity is? Does modern "knowledge" have the capacity to assist us to realize our essential identity, even assuming it accepted such an idea?

Each person will have to come to her or his own conclusions concerning the above questions. In reflecting on these matters, however, one might keep certain things in mind.

The essence, purpose, general nature and basic methodology of the Sufi path has remained unchanged since its inception. Whatever legitimate changes may have emerged, over time, among the practitioners of this mystical path were of a derivative nature from first principles.

The Sufi understanding of the potential of human beings has remained consistent over time. Furthermore, every generation of Sufi practitioners has exhibited many individuals who gave clear evidence of having realized that potential.

To be a Sufi, one does not have to grapple with the impossible task of mastering all of the information and data coming from the many different disciplines to which modernity gives expression. Instead, one merely has to grapple with the very difficult, but far from impossible, task of mastering oneself.

To seek to have knowledge of one's essential spiritual nature, one does not need to have access to, or an understanding of, any aspect of modern conceptual knowledge. All one needs is an authentic Sufi master and a sincere commitment to that shaykh.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, whatever knowledge may come from science, medicine and other forms of modern scholarship will be of use, at best, only up to the time of our death. After that, such knowledge will have no value to us.

On the other hand, Sufi masters indicate that whatever knowledge we gain on the Sufi path will have value beyond the present life. In fact, such knowledge will have its greatest significance and use after our physical death.

## **Chapter 41**

### **Dream**

Mystical reality is to the waking state, as the waking state is to the dream state. More specifically, just as the waking state is considered by most of us to be, somehow, more real than the dream state, so, too, do the Sufi masters consider mystical realization to be more real than the events of the normal, waking state.

Similarly, life after death is to life in the physical/material world, as the post-natal world is to the pre-natal world. In other words, just as most of us would judge the condition of awareness of the post-natal state to be far more acute, intense and nuanced than our state of awareness in the womb, so, too, do the Sufi masters consider the condition of awareness in the next life to be more acute, intense and nuanced than is the case, for most of us, in our earthly life.

From the perspective of the practitioners of the Sufi path, we are living in a dream-like state. When we die, we will come to realize this. The experience of mystical reality affords us the opportunity to gain insight into the truth of the foregoing realization prior to our physical death.

Dream states, waking reality, pre-natal experience, post-natal experience, life after physical death and mystical states, all give expression to different facets of reality. They form a broad spectrum of possibilities.

Each of the aforementioned categories could be further subdivided to reflect the richness of experiential potential inherent in this spectrum. Moreover, just as visible light constitutes but a small portion of the total spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, so, too, according to the Sufi masters, does normal waking reality represent but a very small fraction of the total spectrum of possibilities inherent in reality.

Until the great discoveries of X-rays, ultraviolet light, radio waves, infrared radiation, microwaves and so on, our understanding concerning the parameters of electromagnetic radiation were limited. Similarly, until the announcements of the great mystics, across the ages, with respect to the many different kinds of mystical states and conditions, the grasp of the average individual concerning the possibilities available to us was very restricted.

To be sure, even now, the understanding of most of us vis-a-vis mystical states is very superficial. In fact, many people are, probably, relatively skeptical about the existence or reality of the mystical realm.

Nonetheless, on the basis of their experiences, various mystics from a wide-variety of spiritual traditions have repeatedly tried to draw our attention to the substantive nature of these states and conditions. Of course, we could dismiss or explain away all of these reports as the proclamations of: crazy people; victims of some organic dysfunction; liars; con artists; attention seekers and so on.

Undoubtedly, some of the people reporting such mystical experiences may be subsumable in one or more of the foregoing categories of dismissal. Whether or not all of them can be so subsumed is an entirely different matter. This is especially the case given that the tendency to dismiss is not based on a direct, rigorous examination of the evidence or the people making the claims. In fact, for the vast majority of those who reject the reality of the mystical realm, the dismissal is categorical and out-of-hand.

From the perspective of the mystics, such people continue on in their waking state of dream. The latter people treat the mystics like individuals who are trying to wake the former people from a very intense and pleasant dream. The people who are dreaming tend to get irritated and annoyed with the disturbers of their dreams.

Sufi masters indicate that not only are we living in a waking dream, the dream is a nightmare. Notwithstanding the character of some aspects of our waking dream experiences, our waking dream is not the pleasant affair we have allowed ourselves to be deluded into believing is the case.

We are being manipulated in our waking dream, and our situation is extremely precarious. We are not who most people in the dream say we are. Our identity is quite different, and everything depends on our coming to know our true identity.

When the alarm of death goes off, we will be brought rudely to our senses and recognize the truth in what the practitioners of the mystical path have been saying. When that happens, however, it will be too late, and we shall realize we have overslept and missed the bus of opportunity.



Some people have the capacity to experience what is known as lucid dreaming. In this condition one is able to exercise a degree of conscious control over what goes on in the dream. Such people are able to act, within limits, on the character, contents and direction of the dream rather than be merely passive witnesses to it.

Sufi masters are those individuals who, by the grace of God, have acquired the mystical counterpart to lucid dreaming in relation to the dream of waking life. In a sense, they are able to wake up within the dream state of waking life and become active participants rather than passive witnesses.

To be awake within the dream of waking life is to be aware of the nature of the dream which constitutes waking life. Such a person has knowledge and insight into the possibilities of that dream state. Such an individual can take advantage of this understanding in order to act within the waking dream in a way that generates benefits for the individual.

Some of these benefits are as follows. One can come to know one's true identity. One can realize one's essential capacity. One can come to know the purpose of the dream. One can fulfill the conditions of that purpose. One can come to know God in a direct fashion, unmediated by concepts, theories, language, or rational limitations.

When most people dream, their muscles become paralyzed. There are restrictions imposed on what they can and can't do.

In the dream, of course, we usually feel like we have full use of our muscles. Yet, these are only our "dream muscles". In point of fact, most of us do not have access to use of our "real world" muscles during the course of the dream.

In the dream of waking life, we believe we have full use of our muscles. These, however, are only the muscles of the waking dream. Our spiritual muscles are paralyzed.

When one learns, if God wishes, how to wake up within the dream of waking life, one's spiritual muscles are no longer paralyzed. Consequently, one can use them to fulfill various kinds of tasks, as well as to journey to various realms within the spectrum of possibility of reality which are not possible to do as long as one is asleep in the dream of life.



## Chapter 42

### Expectations

Harboring expectations can be a major source of difficulty. This is true both for people who are considering initiation, as well as for those who already have stepped on to the path.

These expectations generally can be subsumed under roughly five categories. More specifically, one can have expectations in relation to: (1) God; (2) the spiritual guide; (3) the nature of the mystical path; (4) the conduct and character of other people on the path; and, (5) oneself.

One of the problems most of us have, in one form or another, is we try to stuff God into our theories and conceptual frameworks. On the basis of these perspectives, we develop a series of expectations about what God should be and how God should be.

Furthermore, we often set trials and tests which God is expected to ace if Divinity is to pass muster. For example, we may say to ourselves: "if God is to be a God worthy of our praise and worship, then God must do this or that and, thereby, meet our expectations of how God should act".

Alternatively, we may think to ourselves: if God wants our spiritual business, then God must be able to satisfy our carefully prepared 15-point diagnostic check list. We, then, proceed to try to hoist God up on the examination table and check for weaknesses, defects and warning signs.

Different people draw up different kinds of diagnostic check lists to run God through. However, all of these lists are rooted in expectations we have of how God should be.

We believe, for instance that God must be good, or God must be a loving God, or God must be just. In addition, we have our own incompletely worked out and, often inconsistent theories of goodness, love and justice. We, then, proceed to set up expectations which require God to conform to the structural requirements and values embedded in our thinking.

Rarely, do we stop and seek to discover what goodness, or love or justice mean to God. Rarely, do we ask ourselves what, if anything justifies our theories of goodness, love or justice.

Our opinions and beliefs are not justified just because we hold them to be so. Where is the reality check in all of this?

From the perspective of Sufi masters, we distance ourselves from God in direct proportion to the weight of the baggage of expectations we try to impose on God. Indeed, expectations are one of the ways through which veils of ignorance and darkness are generated on the path.

Furthermore, Sufi masters suggest we have the cart before the horse in this matter of expectation. If we wish to realize what can be expected from God, then, first, come to know God as God and not as a function of our theories about God. Let us open ourselves up to the reality of God and let God show us the errors in our various expectations.

People also can have strange sorts of expectations about a spiritual guide. Upon meeting a teacher, we often expect: a spiritual version of fireworks; or, a dazzling, ethereal floor show; or, a display of beautiful, other-worldly lights and auras to be radiating from the countenance of the shaykh; or, breathtaking discourses which probe into the inner sanctum of metaphysical truths.

If we don't experience these, we are disappointed. Our expectations have been violated.

We begin to have doubts about the authenticity of the teacher. After all, if this person were truly a spiritual guide, then, surely, this individual would be this way or that way.

The irony of the situation is this. All of the things we, however unfairly and unjustifiably, may expect concerning the nature of a spiritual guide could be occurring before our eyes, ears and minds, but we are too blind and ignorant to grasp the reality of what is in front of us.

God is under no obligation to disclose spiritual secrets to every Tom, Dick, and Mary that comes along. Similarly, spiritual guides are under no compulsion to share their secrets either.

In addition, we are being presumptuous to suppose our condition is sufficiently worthy to be permitted access to such realities. Although, sometimes, even when we are not worthy of such participation, spiritual generosity comes to our rescue.

In any event, the absence of perceived mystical "signs" in the being or demeanor of someone who may or may not be a genuine spiritual is neither here nor there. A person could be an authentic teacher, and, yet, we might not sense anything "special" about that person. At the same time, the absence of visible marks of grace does not necessarily permit us to

conclude the individual is a genuine teacher who is merely veiling herself or himself from others.

The fact of the matter is, if we really knew what was what, spiritually speaking, we wouldn't be in the predicament of having to find a teacher. In the mean time, we tend to thrash around in the dense jungle of our expectations of things.

In concert with the foregoing kind of expectations, there is a tendency on the part of many people to confuse the purely human side of a teacher with the spiritual side of a teacher. For example, we may meet someone who is, let us assume, a genuine teacher.

Perhaps, we see this person eating, and we think to ourselves: Gee! This person eats more than a guide should eat; or, the way the teacher eats somehow doesn't sit right with our expectations of how a spiritual person ought to eat—whatever way that is.

Maybe the guide watches television or goes to movies. Again, this may jar our spiritual sensibilities.

Maybe the teacher has interests or activities which are inconsistent with our expectations concerning the nature of a shaykh. Maybe the guide does not exhibit as much: patience, tolerance, laughter, and so on, as we feel is appropriate or in the way we deem to be proper.

Without, in any way, wishing to maintain that a spiritual guide has license to do anything and everything he or she pleases, and without wishing to say there are no constraints of propriety within which a teacher is bound to operate, nonetheless, there are degrees of freedom available to a teacher. Through these permissible degrees of freedom, the teacher can give expression to the purely human side without compromising the spiritual side of things.

The friends of God come in many shapes, sizes, colors, temperaments, and capacities. They are not all the same, nor do they need to be.

The operative words in the above are "friends of God". A friend of God makes sincere, heartfelt efforts not do anything on the human side which might undermine, or adversely affect, the spiritual side. God, on the other hand, permits friends to have some discretion in how they conduct their human lives.

However, sometimes, even friends make mistakes. When this is brought to their attention by the Friend, they repent and seek God's forgiveness.

Most of us are not in any position to sort out possible spiritual mistakes of the friends of God, from the degrees of latitude which God has permitted to those same friends. To be sure, one ought not to abandon one's capacity for critical reflection in relation to such issues, but nevertheless, one is entering very dangerous and tricky territory when one establishes a set of expectations to which the teacher must conform in order to be adjudged an authentic teacher.

Almost everyone who is contemplating stepping onto the mystical path or who already has done so, has many expectations about the nature of the spiritual path. For instance, one may have expectations about how easy or difficult the mystical journey is going to be.

One also may have expectations about what one will receive from pursuing the path, such as mystical powers, spiritual gifts, visions, insights, goals and so on. In addition, one may have expectations about how and when and where and why mystical experiences take place.

One reads or hears about some of the mystical experiences of others. As a result, one builds up expectations concerning the arrival of such experiences in one's own case.

Sufi masters point out there are a number of things one can do to help make the spiritual journey go more easily and more quickly. One of these beneficial actions is to throw overboard, without a life preserver, one's expectations about the nature of the Sufi path. The sooner one does this, the better off one will be.

Every spiritual journey is unique because everyone's relationship with God is unique. While there are shared themes and concerns from one journey to the next, one should just let the path unfold of its own accord and in its own way.

If we look after our responsibilities, the path will look after its responsibilities. Expectations only delay and complicate matters.

In addition to our expectations concerning God, the spiritual guide and the nature of the mystical path, we also frequently tend to have expectations with respect to other people, both those on, as well as those outside of, the Sufi journey. For instance, we may have expectations about

how they ought to, or will, behave or what they will and will not understand.

We also may have expectations about their interests, commitments and values. Alternatively, we may have expectations about what their lifestyle is like and so on.

Quite often, people who are not on a mystical journey, at least in any discernible sense, will surprise one with the depth of their understanding about spiritual matters. This surprise is the result of an expectation concerning such people.

One could run into people outside of the path who may exhibit a variety of spiritual qualities, commitments and interests that one might have thought would only be found by someone who had taken initiation with a spiritual guide. The unexpected dimension of such an encounter is, once again, the sign of an expectation which is being rebuffed.

On the other hand, one may meet with people who have become initiated into a mystical tradition, and, yet, they don't seem to understand anything of a spiritual nature. Moreover, such people may not be leading the sort of lifestyle one thought would be second nature to a wayfarer of the mystical way. Here, too, expectations are being exposed.

According to the Sufi masters, the best policy is not to have any expectations at all, either with respect to people on, or outside of, the mystical path. If one does this, one will never be disappointed, and, more often than not, one will be able to appreciate people on their own terms.

We all have spiritual potential. We all have spiritual problems. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. We all have dimensions we hold in common, and we all have our unique qualities.

Sufi masters suggest we should not meet others with expectations. Instead, we should meet them with friendship.

Finally, we all carry expectations concerning ourselves in relationship to the mystical path. Some of these expectations are rooted in low self-esteem. Other expectations are embedded in high self-esteem.

The masters of the Sufi path suggest we dispense with both kinds of expectations. The practitioners of the Sufi path indicate that if we get rid of these kinds of expectations, then, God willing, we will become receptive to

truths about our essential self that will put to shame both our sense of low-esteem as well as our feelings of high-esteem.



## Chapter 43

### Blessings

Never has so much been given to so many with less gratitude and appreciation. Never has so much been owed by so many to just One.

The former statement is not about modern pro athletes. The latter statement is not about the bank of one's choice. Both declarations are about the status of our collective relationships with God.

Like some Dickensian character, we stand before God with bowls in hand pleading: "Please, Sir, we want more." No sooner do we receive, then we forget from Whence and from Whom it came.

We may even return to our respective groups with whatever has been placed in our bowl and boast about how through our: intelligence, cleverness, artistry, strength of character and, we might add, at some risk to our person, we have succeeded where others have failed. The tendency to try to take credit for that which is not our doing is part of the nature of being human.

Even without our asking, the blessings which God is constantly bestowing on us are so numerous that they cannot be counted. Sometimes, however, we become confused and limit what is, to what we experience sensorially or to what we permit into our awareness. As a result, we impose limitations on God's generosity and kindness concerning us due to the insensitivity of our instruments of apperception.

Medical practitioners have said one of the puzzles in need of explanation is not how we become ill but, rather, how we stay healthy. Within us, and on us, at any given moment, are an armada of viruses and bacteria constantly probing our immune systems for weaknesses.

How many times a day, or how many times in an hour or minute, are these probes and attacks repelled by our biological defenses? No one in medicine knows. No one in science has even a remotely informed guess.

Some say the difference between health and illness under such conditions is a function of: a balanced diet; a sufficient amount of the right kind of exercise; limiting, if not discontinuing, our intake of alcohol and tobacco; a stable emotional life; proper periods of sleep, and regular

medical check-ups. Indeed, studies have been done which show a strong correlation between all of the foregoing factors and health maintenance.

However, with all due respect to the health industry, if the above recommendations were the entire story, most of us would be dead or in chronic care units. This is so because most of us don't run our life styles in accordance with what health care providers are advocating.

Our failure to heed the warnings is neither here nor there. We pay our money, and we take our chances.

The issue being addressed here is that in most cases neither medicine nor science has been able to show a causal relationship between the absence of good health care practices and either illness in general or particular kinds of illness. The links are all correlational and statistical in nature.

Discussions are couched in terms of risk factors, statistical trends, epidemiological patterns, morbidity tables, prognosis, and so on. No one can say what will happen to any specific individual, but what does happen to any given individual often, although not always, can be made sense of in terms of medical research and clinical experience.

The reason health care findings are largely correlational in nature is because the confluence of factors which lead to illness are too complex in their permutations and combinations for us to be able to reduce them to some nice, simple causal equation or principle. Our knowledge of how everything fits together is, despite all the advances which have been made in the last several hundred years, too meager.

God works both through what we know, as well as through what we don't know. Moreover, sometimes what we know-or think we know— blinds us to what we don't know, and since what we don't know is far more than what we do know, there is a potential for considerable blindness on our parts.

Without wishing to discount anything the health sciences have discovered, Sufi masters understand, in a very direct manner, that both health and illness come from God. God can keep people healthy, despite the presence of contra-indications in that person's life style.

Similarly, God can bring about illness, despite the fact the individual may be abiding by all the appropriate health care rules. Go figure.

Every second of health is, ultimately, a blessing of God. Every time our hearts beat, every moment we breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide,

every second blood flows through our arteries and veins, every instance in which the billions of cells in our bodies perform their assigned functions in a problem-free manner, we receive uncountable blessings from God.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the Sufi masters, illness can be as big a blessing, if not greater, than the blessing of good health. When we experience the pain and enervation of illness, we feel vulnerable and fragile. Consequently, we may be more open to humility than might be the case when we are healthy and have convinced ourselves we are beyond the grasp of God's will.

When our health fails, we sometimes understand, more clearly than in health, how little control we actually have over the affairs of life. As a result, when we are ill, there may be more of a sense of ourselves as dependent beings rather than independent creatures.

When our bodies are subdued by disease, we sometimes become more cognizant of the emotional and spiritual illnesses which have been ravaging our lives even when our bodies were healthy. Whatever problems are created by the disease process, opportunities for reflection are generated as well through the down-time created by the debilitating character of the illness.

Sufi masters have indicated that the spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical condition of the ill is conducive to drawing closer to God. Furthermore, the practitioners of the Sufi path have affirmed that God listens even more closely to the plaintive cries of the ill than to the entreaties of the healthy.

Illness is not necessarily a punishment. However, the rigors of illness may be necessary for the spiritual development of the individual. To contend with the infirmities, weaknesses, sufferings and humiliations of illness, is a struggle because these are all affronts to the ego which has a very high opinion of itself.

Yet, every struggle is also an opportunity to overcome our arrogance, pride and hardness of heart. Illness is an opportunity to repent. This is so simply because we are too weak to continue feeding energy to the parasitic ego which, during health, has been resisting the idea we have anything for which to repent.

The Sufi masters have noted how, sometimes, illness is the modality God has chosen to confer grace and blessings on the

individual. In exchange for the individual's pain, suffering, and discomfort, the person is given gifts, of one sort or another, which may come to fruition later in this life, or in the life to come, or in both. God is able to give wages of Grace for many types of work, effort, struggle, and sacrifice.

Illness can be the means of bringing people together. Illness can be a way of taking one out of action temporarily so that some even greater trial or difficulty may be avoided.

Illness may serve to push one in new, better directions with respect to family, friends or the community. Illness may be the catalytic agent which helps bring about constructive transformations in attitude, intention or behavior.

In view of the foregoing, one might mention something to the effect that illness can be a blessing in disguise. In point of fact, however, our whole life is a multifaceted blessing in disguise to which, unfortunately, we have become inured.

As a result, we have a tendency to be a thankless, graceless lot who are always seeking to renegotiate our contract with God no matter how poorly we have performed previously. Furthermore, somehow we frequently operate under the misapprehension that because we may have been associated, in some way, with one, or more, positive deeds at some point in our past, therefore, God ought to be indebted to us.

In reality, the opposite is the case. We, eternally, ought to be indebted to God for permitting us to be associated, in even a minor way, with deeds which are the future source of, as well as give present expression to, blessings from God.

## **Chapter 44**

### **Prophets**

All Prophets, with God's permission, have taught about, and initiated people into, the realities of the essential nature of being human. This has been done to provide human beings with an opportunity to become unified within themselves, within their communities, within creation and within Divinity.

Religions have been invented and perpetuated by various individuals to provide human beings with an opportunity, or so it often seems, to try to undo the work of the Prophets. Through religion, human beings all too frequently have become disunited with their own inner essence. Through religion, families, communities, and nations often have become disunited. Through religion, many of us have become estranged from the rest of creation.

There are many religions, but there is only one reality which underwrites all of creation. There are many religions, but all Prophets came with the same basic message. There are many religions, but all manifestations of revelation have come from one uncreated source.

There are many religions, but all of us are rooted in the same essential nature. There are many religions, but ultimate spiritual success can come in only one way: we must die to our false selves before we die to our physical selves.

There are not any major religions, and very few, if any, minor religions, which do not advocate that human beings should do the following. We should exhibit: patience, tolerance, forbearance, compassion, respect, charity, balance, humility, forgiveness, modesty, justice, sincerity, honesty, integrity, kindness, love, and gratitude.

All of these recommendations were the teachings of the Prophets. These teachings were subsequently usurped by different religions and, then, packaged, advertised and distributed by such religions under their own logo and letterhead.

There are not any major religions, and very few, if any, minor religions, which do not urge human beings to avoid the following. We should refrain from: anger, selfishness, ingratitude, jealousy, hypocrisy, envy, insensitivity, malice, immodesty, greed, dishonesty, cruelty, injustice, pride, intolerance, arrogance, and immoderateness.

Once again, these were all teachings of the one hundred and twenty-four thousand Prophets who appeared among human beings over the course of history. These teachings are not the property of any given religion. They are a legacy for humanity bequeathed to us through the Prophets.

Every religion, major or minor, has indicated there is a functional relationship between, on the one hand, what we do or fail to do in this life, and, on the other hand, what will happen to us after this life is over. More specifically, a life lived in accordance with the positive qualities outlined earlier will be to our spiritual benefit. A life lived indulging in the negative qualities noted previously will be to our spiritual detriment.

The foregoing functional relationship may be covered with many different kinds of theological cloth as one goes from religion to religion. Nonetheless, the underlying principle came through the Prophets.

Every religion, major or minor, has stressed the importance of faith, prayer, fasting, chanting, charity, meditation, seclusion and contemplation. These activities did not begin with any particular religion. They were introduced through, and reiterated by, the Prophets.

Every religion, major or minor, has given emphasis to the fiduciary spiritual responsibility which human beings have in relation to the rest of creation. No religion can take credit for this emphasis since it was an integral part of the teachings of all Prophets.

Repeatedly and clearly, the Prophets have informed humanity of the temporary, illusory and treacherous nature of this plane of existence. Religions have ignored these warnings and become engrossed, sometimes almost exclusively, in the business of seeking, brokering, and expanding worldly power.

Every religion, major or minor, has alluded to the essential, spiritual link which all human beings have with a transcendent reality. Every religion, major or minor, has enjoined human beings to cultivate and realize the full potential inherent in that spiritual link.

Religions quibble over the style and form which the search for realization should assume. Prophets have stated, quite clearly, over and over again, realization is, in essence, a matter of neither form nor style.

Religions jockey for public relation advantages by saying their spiritual journey is better than your spiritual journey. The Prophets constantly have

reminded humanity that if we do not realize our essential spiritual capacity, any spiritual journey becomes a trip to nowhere, with interesting landscape.

The Prophets have enjoined humanity to: love one another; help one another; care for one another; encourage one another; support one another; forgive one another; be kind and charitable to one another; show mercy, justice and compassion to one another. All of this should be done irrespective of the beliefs, values, race, gender, class, wealth and ethnic origin of our fellow human beings.

The Prophets have not called on us to judge, condemn, ridicule, harass, torture, abuse, hate, malign, kill and oppress those who may disagree with us. Unfortunately, religions often have not taken the teachings of the Prophets to heart.

The Prophets consistently have called on humanity to seek peace. Most religions consistently have called on their followers to wage war—militarily, economically, educationally, culturally, politically, and/or psychologically.

Despite differences in historical, geographical and social circumstances, there has been a set of universal themes which have been woven into the fabric of the teachings of the Prophets. Religions tend to have marginalized these universal themes in order to wallow in non-essential disparities.

If we ignored the superficial, technical and legalistic differences associated with religions and actually tried to live in submission to the universal themes expressed through the teachings of the Prophets, one might suppose that individuals, families, communities, nations, and nature would be in a lot better shape than is currently the case. By straying from the teachings of the Prophets, in the name of religion, we have done much damage to ourselves, our neighbors and creation.

Sufi masters are among those who have sought to keep alive the spirit of the Prophetic tradition. They teach in accordance with the teachings of the Prophets. They follow the council of the Prophets and enjoin initiates of the Sufi path to do so as well.

Sufi masters believe as the Prophets believe. The values and activities of these spiritual guides are in conformity with the values and activities of the Prophets.

Sufi masters seek the same goal which the Prophets sought. They reach out to humanity and creation with intentions which reflect the intentions of the Prophets.

In short, the universal spiritual message which has been delivered to human beings through the Prophets is being delivered, as well, by Sufi masters. They have dedicated their lives to following all that is encompassed by the Prophetic tradition.



## **Chapter 45**

### **Khalifah**

Among the practitioners of the Sufi path, a person who acts on behalf of, and under the authority of, a spiritual guide is known as a khalifah. A khalifah is someone who has been selected to assume certain spiritual responsibilities as a vicegerent or steward of the Sufi Order or branch to which the individual belongs.

A khalifah is not elected into her or his office of vicegerent by the members of a Sufi Order. Moreover, becoming a khalifah is neither due to a political patronage appointment nor is it a matter of blood relationships.

The shaykh is the one who gives the indication concerning whom is to be a khalifah. However, no khalifah assumes his or her responsibilities without the approval of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and without, ultimately, the permission of God.

The reasons why a given individual is selected as a khalifah are not always readily apparent. To be sure, often times, the person chosen displays obvious qualities of piety, scholarship, depth of spiritual understanding, and so on. On the other hand, there are occasions when the individual who is to become a khalifah may not possess many of the qualities one might normally associate with such responsibilities.

A person who becomes khalifah may be relatively ignorant with respect to many spiritual matters. Alternatively, there may be other individuals within the Order who possess greater knowledge, understanding, and so on than does the person chosen to be khalifah.

Nonetheless, due to the presence of some quality within the spiritual character of the individual, the person is selected. This quality might give expression to a very deep, yet hidden, love, loyalty, nobility, humility, sincerity, compassion, reliability or some other feature or set of features.

Whether or not the reason(s) for selection are discernible to other people in the Order, and irrespective of whether or not the members of the Order agree with the appointment, the person chosen is deemed by: God, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the shaykhs of the Order, to be the appropriate person to be khalifah. What anybody else thinks or feels about the matter is irrelevant.

Another point to keep in mind is that a khalifah does not really do anything on her own or his own. In fact, no matter how brilliant or pious a person may be, no one actually has the capacity to accomplish anything independently of Divine support.

Success comes from the grace of God and not from an individual's personal qualities and abilities. To whomever God gives help, in that assistance, the individual has all he or she needs.

At any given time, there may be more than one khalifah appointed by a Sufi master. Each of these people will have different responsibilities.

Generally speaking, a khalifah is appointed in order to look after things, administratively and/or spiritually, in the physical absence of the Shaykh. For example, the shaykh may have initiates who live in another region of the country or the world who need various kinds of help. There also may be certain activities which the shaykh wants to take place on a regular basis in other localities, far removed from the physical presence of the shaykh. Consequently, the spiritual guide may appoint a variety of people to meet these sort of needs in different communities.

In addition, when the shaykh, for whatever reason, must be away from the normal 'home base' of operations, there are any number of activities, commitments, and observances which must continue. The shaykh often will appoint a khalifah to oversee these affairs in her or his spiritual absence.

Among the various people selected by a shaykh to be a khalifah, there may be one person who is designated as the spiritual successor to the shaykh. This person would serve as spiritual guide for the Order or branch after the current shaykh passes away.

However, for reasons best known to God, not all shaykhs necessarily will have a successor. Historically, there have been any number of lines of spiritual lineage which have come to an end with a certain shaykh.

Sometimes these chains of spiritual authority start up again after an interim hiatus, and sometimes they do not. God arranges all of this according to the character of the Divine plan which gives expression to God's will in such matters.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, the khalifah who becomes successor to a given shaykh is, in effect, only a different locus of spiritual manifestation of the Divine grace which flowed through the predecessor. The

underlying spiritual reality, which is the actual source of guidance, remains the same.

This is not a matter of reincarnation. Divinity always remains One. Nevertheless, Divinity is manifested through different forms and modalities.

Each modality or locus of manifestation has its own unique qualities and capacities. In an indirect and rather passive manner, these capacities tend to shape, color and orient, to a certain degree, the spiritual light which is transmitted through such loci of manifestation.

As far as essential capacity is concerned, each spiritual guide is unique. Yet, the spiritual support, protection, grace, wisdom, and so on, that makes mystical guidance possible, all comes from the same source—namely, God. The successor merely constitutes the latest modality of manifestation through which the lineage of spiritual authority is being transmitted.

Sufi masters also speak of being a khalifah in a sense other than the foregoing. This sense has nothing to do with the assuming of spiritual responsibilities for a particular Sufi shaykh.

More specifically, God has created everyone with the potential to be a vicegerent or steward of Divinity. Such a potential points inwardly as well as outwardly, and the outward aspect of this potential cannot be satisfied until the inward dimension has been realized.

According to Sufi masters, only when the *sirr-illahi*, the mystery of God, has been activated in the core of our essential spiritual capacity will we be able to become the khalifah of God. This will not happen, however, until all of our spiritual affairs are in a condition of impeccable order, harmony, purity and perfection.

When we have become proper vicegerents of the Divine gifts within us, then, and only then, will be permitted to become authorized vicegerents of creation. Unfortunately, virtually everywhere we look in the world we see overwhelming evidence of what happens when human beings, who are not spiritually ready, unjustly usurp the role of khalifah and proceed to despoil, degrade, and corrupt everything in creation with which they come into contact.

As a result, many of us have become the anti-khalifahs of creation. Instead, of fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of service to, and care of, creation, as God had given us the spiritual potential to do, we have become the inveterate enemy of everything in creation ... including ourselves.



## Chapter 46

### Jealousy

To desire or covet what someone else has and to feel ill will toward those who have what we want, reveals a great deal, in a rather unflattering way, about what we think and feel toward others, ourselves and God. To begrudge others what they have, also displays a considerable ignorance on our part about the nature of reality.

Sufi masters indicate jealousy is a function of two forces: passion and anger. Jealousy gives expression to passion through the aspect of coveting or desiring or longing which is directed at some object, process or situation. The dimension of anger in jealousy is displayed in the hostility, hatred, dislike, resentment or malice we feel toward those who have what we do not.

The experience of jealousy is not precisely the same for everyone. The precise flavor of the experience will depend on a variety of things. For example, one factor will involve just how much passion and anger have been blended together to yield the state of jealousy.

Some recipes for jealousy involve a lot of desire and only a modest amount of anger. Other concoctions of jealousy call for just a small portion of desire but spice it up with a considerable amount of anger.

Some of these preparations follow a time-tested ritual which has been handed down from generation to generation. However, we all generally garnish these efforts with idiosyncratic ingredients drawn from life's experiences.

In addition, the final flavor of jealousy will depend on how it is cooked. Some of us like to bring jealousy to a boil right away. Others among us prefer letting the pot simmer on a back burner.

Jealousy is a sort of all purpose dish in the sense that it works with an incredible array of possibilities. Success, possessions, friends, power, talent, money, family, career, spirituality, health, education, status, fame, beauty, character, charisma, and happiness are just a few of the many choices we have. Furthermore, if we desire, we can bring these things together in lots of different combinations which may appeal to our individual palates.

To be jealous, means we are basing our sense of identity and wellbeing on what we do not have and not on whom we are. We are defining ourselves by what is absent and not by what is present.

To be jealous, indicates we believe clothes (or adornments) make the person. Alternatively, jealousy suggests we feel the clothes which are worn are an accurate indicator of the sort of person wearing them. As such, jealousy divulges a desperation to indulge in the superficial.

To be jealous, is an admission that happiness is not a function of what is within us. Instead, we, in effect, have thrown in the towel.

We have become convinced the keys to happiness are a matter of: "if only". If only we had this, we would be fulfilled. If only we were that, we would be content. If only this were to happen, we would be satisfied. If only we possessed such and such, then, people would know who we are.

We do not seem to understand that "if only" is a never-ending, receding horizon. The more quickly we run to grasp the apparent promise of "if only", the more quickly does the realization of its promise recede into the horizon.

Even when the object of "if only" is acquired by us, we discover we still are not as fulfilled or as content or as satisfied as we previously had anticipated would be the case. We quickly move on to the next "if only" on our wish list. The horizon recedes some more.

When we are jealous of others, we look through glasses which filter out everything but our passion and anger. We fail to see the reality of the context from which we have extricated the object of desire. We fail to see there are frequently strings attached to the objects of our desires.

We believe money, fame, power and so on are just what the doctor ordered to get our lives back on track. When we hear of the troubles of famous, powerful and wealthy people, we say: "I wouldn't mind having some of that trouble". Yet, if by magic, we were given some of that trouble, we would find ourselves creating a new "if only" list.

Every worldly object or situation which we possibly could desire is entangled in a variety of difficulties. This is the nature of the world. It cannot be otherwise.

We have thousands of years of historical events which bear witness to the foregoing truth. All aspects of worldly processes have problematic strings attached to them.

These strings will bind and constrain and entangle us in unpredictable ways. These strings will tie us, in one manner or another, to misery, pain, unhappiness, alienation, and emptiness.

Nevertheless, we insist on seeing only what our passion and anger wish us to see. We believe snatching the cheese without getting caught is quite 'doable'. In fact, we see just the cheese, nothing else.

The bitter irony in all this is as follows. Whether we get that for which we are jealous, or we do not get it, in both cases, we are caught and entangled. We either are ensnared by the attached strings which come with all worldly things, or we are bound up in the knots of our jealousy—jealousy being merely the world in disguise.

When we are jealous of others, we are implicitly criticizing God. In effect, we are saying: "God, once again, has got things wrong. God has gone and given to someone else, something which, by rights, belongs to me". If this were not so, why, when we are jealous, do we begrudge others that which they have but which we covet for ourselves.

Our passion is our justification and warrant for claiming the object of jealousy is, by rights, ours. Passion always assumes its desires are justified.

Our anger is our authority for asserting that the object of our jealousy ought not to have been given to the other person. Anger always feels righteous in its displays.

Our passion condemns God. Our anger condemns God. Yet, both modes of condemnation are subsidized by ignorance.

We do not know why God gives certain things to others. We do not know why God has withheld those same things from us.

We assume having is a desirable state of affairs. We presume not having is an undesirable condition.

We do not consider the possibility that having may be a curse and not having a blessing. We do not entertain the possibility that God is trying to save us from ourselves.

Tests and trials from God come in all manner of forms. Having and not having both, each in its own way, can be trials.

God knows who needs which test. God has made no mistake in giving or in withholding.

The mistake is ours. Our jealousy blinded us. Our jealousy misled us into supposing things ought to have been other than they are. Our jealousy tricked us into believing God doesn't know why things are being arranged in the way they are.

Perhaps, instead of jealousy, we ought to feel compassion for those who have. They may be caught up in something which they really don't understand and from which, if they have any sense, they may be desperately seeking to extricate themselves. These people may have the cheese. However, they very well could be thinking: "If only I could get this bar, which is crushing me, off my back". If so, their plight and difficulty deserve our compassion. Indeed, there, but for the grace of God, we could be.



## **Chapter 47**

### **Fear**

Sometimes God has to make people an offer they can't refuse, or, at least, they shouldn't refuse it. When people don't respond to kindness, friendship, generosity, gentleness, and love, then other avenues are taken.

Human arrogance, pride and ignorance can be the source of tremendous spiritual resistance and rebelliousness. We can be incredibly dense and out of touch with everything except our own fantasies and desires.

Sometimes, fear is God's way of reaching out and touching someone. It is a Divine wake-up call reminding the individual that she or he is due for a reality check.

Someone once said war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means. Somewhat analogously, the introduction of fear into our lives by God is a continuation of Divine love by other means. In a sense, Divinely generated fear can be considered to be a form of tough love.

Fear in the above sense is a form of compassionate severity. Alternatively, the induction of Divine fear can be construed as a species of compassionate severity. Which way one characterizes a given instance of Divinely induced fear may depend on where the emphasis falls: with compassion or with severity.

Fear has a dimension of severity because of the nature of the consequences which may ensue. These consequences may involve: pain, unpleasantness, discomfort, death, loss, destruction, rigorous chastisement, humiliation, sorrow, constraint, illness and various other kinds of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual trauma.

Unless we have masochistic inclinations, most of us tend to try to avoid such things if we can. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one's point of view, God has the wherewithal to ensure we cannot avoid such consequences. If a friendly warning should not succeed in drawing us out of our spiritual somnolence, then plan B comes into effect for immediate execution, so to speak.

The eliciting of fear by God has a compassionate aspect as well as a dimension of severity. If God were indifferent to our spiritual well-being, there would be no need for God to try various ways of enlisting our co-operation.

According to the Sufi masters, God is not a tyrant who is so weak, lonely and insecure that the worship of human beings is necessary to put meaning and a sense of self-worth into Divine existence. God is independent of humanity.

There is nothing we can add to Divinity if we submit to God. There is nothing we can detract from Divinity if we rebel against God.

We will be the sole beneficiaries if we seek to fulfill the purpose of our existence. We will be the sole losers if we fail to realize our true identity and essential capacity.

God invokes fear in our lives because of, let us say, God's fear we will persist in our folly and stupidity and miss the opportunity which our lifetimes offer. This Divine fear for (not of) us is out of mercy toward, and compassion for, human beings.

God grasps very well the infinite extent of power which is available to Divinity. God fully appreciates that whatever Divine commands are issued cannot be stopped or defended against by human beings.

God knows the lives, health and welfare of every human being are subject to Divine prerogative. God is acquainted, in precise detail, with the unfathomable infinitude which separate Divine transcendence from the lives of human beings. God understands the utter dependence of human beings on God and the complete independence of God from humanity.

Humanity and all of creation could be wiped from existence by God without so much as a quark left behind. This could be done in less time than no time at all.

In short, God has insight into what Divinity is capable of. God has a very solid data base out of which to develop a fear on behalf of human beings. God is afraid for us because we don't have enough sense to be afraid for ourselves.

God lets us taste some of the flavor of this Divine fear, and the knowledge in which it is rooted, by inducing fear in us. If we learn from this fear, if we take it to heart, if we begin to try to slough off our spiritual lethargy as a result of this fear, then we will benefit from the inducement of fear in the way God intended.

The practitioners of the Sufi path confirm that God's preferred modalities of dealing with human beings are through love, intimacy,

friendship, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, ease and so on. God shows us, and alludes to, the severe side of possibilities to inform us about the alternatives to God's preferred style of relating to human beings. The choice of which route we want to go is, for the most part, up to us.

In a very fundamental way, the fear we direct toward God is really a fear of ourselves projected elsewhere. Just as God is well aware of what Divinity can do, we too are well aware of what we can do.

We have an insider's perspective on our selfishness, cruelty, recklessness, rebelliousness, intransigence, density, darkness and ignorance. We know the sorrow, misery and hurt we can bring into the lives of others as well as our own life. We bear witness to how uncaring, unloving, insensitive and mean we can be.

God tells us something about some of the rigorous and severe dimensions inherent in Divine possibility. From time to time, God shows something of Divine Attributes involving rigor and severity. We know something of our nature and possibilities. From the latter is born a fear of the former.

We fear ourselves because we are out of control. We cannot predict if, and when, our underside will assert itself. We are terrified of our desires, inclinations and impulses.

We are terrified of our condition of being out of control. This is so because beyond the horror of the knowledge of what we are capable, is the rude awakening that we ourselves will be responsible for whatever Divine consequences ensue from our giving into our inner darkness and ignorance.

We fear God because God has shared with us something of what Divinity is capable with the right inducement from us. Furthermore, we fear God because we know of what we are all too capable.

We fear God because we understand, however dimly, that giving expression to the dark aspect of our capacity will permit us to know, with even more intimacy, that of which God is capable. Be afraid ... be very afraid.



## **Chapter 48**

### **Exoteric**

Historically, there has been a tendency by many people to try to set mysticism in opposition to those aspects of spirituality which are doctrinally and methodologically more accessible to the generality of people. The motivations for doing so are varied but always in error.

There is no conflict or contradiction between, on the one hand the so-called outer or exoteric practices, values and beliefs of spirituality, and, on the other hand, the inner or esoteric (mystical) practices, values and beliefs of spirituality. There are, however, important differences of emphasis, priorities, orientation and perspective between the two dimensions of spirituality.

Some people, for their own reasons, have tried to interpret these differences as evidence of a fundamental and irrevocable opposition between the outer or exoteric approach to spirituality and the inner or esoteric style of engaging spirituality. In other words, differences of, say, perspective have been transformed into irreconcilable antagonisms, and these manufactured antagonisms have, in turn, been escalated into polarized claims that only one of the two broad streams gives expression to the truth.

There are those who have tried to maintain that the esoteric or mystical dimension is nothing but a den of iniquity which is leading people to spiritual destruction. Simultaneously, there are others who attempt to argue that the exoteric or outer dimension is nothing but an antiquated, fossilized museum of empty rituals and institutionalized ignorance.

Both of the foregoing positions are, in general, incorrect. Nonetheless, there may be particular instances in which there is an element of truth to what each position is claiming.

More specifically, there are, in fact, some who claim to be mystics who operate on the basis of certain practices, beliefs and values which distort truth and lead its adherents away from God.

Therefore, these brands of "mysticism" have the all-too-real potential for seducing individuals to their own spiritual destruction.

Similarly, there are, in fact, some people who follow an exoteric path which has been reduced to little more than a series of empty rituals to

which one pays lip-service. This kind of exotericism is steeped in ignorance and, frequently, degenerates into various institutionalized forms whose primary function seems to be to transmit such ignorance and emptiness from one generation to the next.

Notwithstanding the foregoing comments, exotericism and esotericism should have a loving, caring, reciprocal relationship with one another. They should be like two friends who have many features in common but, nonetheless, lead somewhat different lives as a result of variations in interests, experiences, inclinations, goals and so on.

For instance, both friends may agree the defining essence of the human being is spiritual in nature. On the other hand, they may be committed to different perspectives concerning the precise character of that spiritual nature and what implications such nature has for issues of identity and spiritual capacity.

One friend may be interested in seeking to attain heaven and avoid hell. This person arranges his or her life accordingly.

The other friend may be preoccupied with seeking and realizing Divine love and, consequently, de-emphasizes the importance of heaven and hell as sources of motivation in one's life, but without denying their reality. This individual also organizes her or his life in a way which reflects the life goal.

One friend may restrict herself or himself to only certain practices of worship and remembrance of God. These practices are the ones which this person finds most meaningful and useful. These practices are the ones with which the individual is happy and content. These practices are the ones with which the individual feels most comfortable and which are most consonant with his or her life.

The other friend enjoys the modalities of worship and remembrance to which her or his friend is committed. However, this friend has found other practices which also are meaningful and of practical value.

These additional practices bring happiness and contentment as well. This friend also feels comfortable with these other modes of worship and finds them quite consonant with her or his life. Moreover, this friend doesn't feel compelled to choose one set of practices over the other, but, rather, she or he uses them in complementary fashion.

One friend may feel no need to seek out a guide to assist one in journeying toward God. This friend may feel sufficient guidance already exists in the form of sacred texts or commentaries and spends her or his time studying such materials.

The other friend may want to work in close association with a guide in order to understand how sacred texts can be given expression in living form. This friend may feel the need to seek out help to learn how to actively incorporate different levels of meanings and principles of sacred texts into one's day-to-day life.

This person also may realize that the more deeply she or he delves into such matters that the process is fraught with possible dangers involving the capacity of the ego to distort and bias understanding. Consequently, this friend does not feel safe in pursuing these issues without benefit of consultative expertise from an active practitioner and not just a theoretician.

One friend may not be very adventuresome and may feel most comfortable staying within certain parameters of experience. The other friend may be more adventuresome and want to see what is possible in the way of experience and, yet, still be within the realms of permissibility. This is a matter of temperament and inclination, nothing more.

One friend may have a need to experience things directly. This friend may also want to be certain about the nature of such experiences.

The other friend may not be as interested in direct experience as his or her friend and is content with indirect modalities of experience. In addition, this friend may have no need to seek certainty concerning the nature of those experiences.

One friend may be prepared to wait until the next life to realize the truth about identity, reality and so on. The other friend may not be inclined to wait and, instead, this friend may want to determine what can be known in this life.

One friend may wish to use his or her mind in the most competent manner possible in order to worship God. However, this friend may have no interest in learning how to use other potential instruments within the human being in order to enhance the range and intensity of one's manner of worshiping God.

The other friend may not be satisfied with just developing the mind as an instrument of worshipping God. This friend may want to explore and develop other modalities as well.

One friend may feel that  $x$  hours of worship per day or week is all she or he can handle. The other friend may want to devote  $x + y$  hours per day or week toward worship.

One friend may find certain teachings difficult to understand and, in addition, may have no interest in working at coming to an understanding of those teachings. The other friend also may find the same teachings difficult to understand but, unlike her or his friend, is willing to struggle toward trying to understand such teachings.

One friend may like the processes of meditation and contemplation. The other friend may not like these processes.

One friend may have something inexplicable inside her or him which is constantly urging the individual onward in pursuit of various dimensions of spirituality. This friend genuinely may be puzzled why her or his friend doesn't seem to feel the same urge.

The other friend does not feel a constant inner urge to probe further into spirituality. This friend genuinely may be puzzled about why, to varying degrees, his or her friend does seem to be driven spiritually.

In all of the foregoing considerations, exotericism and esotericism are not in conflict with one another. They are not in opposition to one another.

The fact of the matter is, one merely has two people with differences in their respective modes of engaging spirituality. The spiritual interests, goals, inclinations, degrees of commitment, perspectives, priorities and needs of the two friends are different.

These differences do not translate into forcing one to conclude only one of the two can be true. These differences are reflections of intention or the exercise of free will in relation to the spectrum of possibilities to which spirituality gives expression.

Both of these friends believe in truth and spiritual discipline. Both friends orient their lives through spiritual values. Both of these friends are drawn, in one way or another, to the realm of spiritual transcendence. Both friends, each in his or her own way, wish to actively seek submission to Divinity. Both friends derive their sense of purpose, meaning and identity from pursuing spirituality.



Both friends believe in spiritual commitment and in honoring that commitment. The hearts of both friends are inclined toward, and attracted by, qualities of generosity, kindness, forbearance, forgiveness and love. Both friends make mistakes and try to correct and atone for those mistakes.

The exoteric stream of spirituality is the one which almost all of us start with in life. There is much to explore, understand, implement and appreciate within this stream.

The esoteric stream of spirituality is one which not everyone seeks out. However, generally speaking, the only way of getting to it is by swimming in the exoteric stream.

These streams are not separate streams. They are expressions of a much larger body of water, like mighty rivers which flow in the ocean. These streams move through one another in subtle and complex ways.

Eddies and vortices are shaped and formed by the intertwining of dimensions from both streams. We are those eddies and vortices.

Each of us has the responsibility of seeking to worship and remember God in the way one believes God feels is most appropriate for one. Each of us has the responsibility for deciding to what extent one will pursue trying to realize one's essential capacity and identity. Each of us has the responsibility for deciding how far to pursue the different dimensions of spirituality.

We ought to do all we can to be supportive of, and encouraging to, and empathetic with, others who are struggling with these choices and decisions. In the end, however, it is God, not us, Who will judge the degree of sincerity in our respective attempts to discharge our responsibilities according to our capacities to do so.



## Chapter 49

### Qawwali

There are differences of perspective among Sufi masters concerning sacred music. Some shaykhs consider sacred music to be of spiritual value and benefit when listened to under certain conditions.

Other shaykhs believe there is no, or little, spiritual benefit to be derived from sacred music, and there even may be spiritual dangers which are involved in listening to such music. Still other shaykhs, although, for various reasons, they do not listen to sacred music themselves, accept the fact there are authentic Sufi shaykhs who do not share their perspective on this matter.

Among the shaykhs who do believe sacred music has a constructive role to play on the Sufi path, there are, again, differences. Some shaykhs permit the singing of sacred songs as long as these are unaccompanied by musical instruments.

Some shaykhs permit both singing and the playing of musical instruments. On the other hand, there may be differences among various shaykhs concerning what musical instruments are to be allowed.

Other shaykhs not only permit singing and musical instruments to be used in sacred music, they also sanction sacred turning. There are a number of different forms of sacred turning, but they all involve some limited set of prescribed movements in conjunction with chanting, singing and/or the playing of certain instruments.

Differences of opinion among Sufi shaykhs concerning the role - - if any -- of sacred music with respect to the mystical path may be due to a variety of factors. Some of these are doctrinal in nature. Other reasons for these sorts of differences of opinion may reflect the spiritual etiquette of the Sufi Orders to which various practitioners of the Sufi path belong. Still other reasons behind these differences may be a function of personal spiritual experiences and/or inclinations of individual spiritual temperament.

Whatever the form of sacred music to which a person may listen, there is a spiritual etiquette which must be observed. Without this etiquette, the music may lose much, if not all, of its sacred qualities.

First and foremost, an individual needs the permission of her or his shaykh to listen to sacred music. Not everybody's spiritual condition, circumstances or maturity is the same.

For any given individual, there may be some times which are spiritually better, or worse, than others as far as listening to sacred music is concerned. The shaykh is the only one who can sort this out for the initiate.

Secondly, as a general rule, there are constraints concerning time, place, company and even musicians/singers. Not everything is permissible.

For example, timings for sacred music may be largely restricted to once a week gatherings with the shaykh (often on a Thursday evening) or to special occasions commemorating the anniversary of one of the previous shaykhs of a given Sufi Order. Furthermore, the place chosen for sacred music should be conducive to creating the sort of spiritual atmosphere which enhances concentration on the spiritual matters at hand and which is free of worldly distractions.

The company one keeps while listening to sacred music should have the proper intentional outlook concerning such sessions. As one might expect, the intentions should be spiritual in nature and not worldly or ego oriented.

People, for instance, who respond to sacred music with base instincts may not only spoil the spiritual atmosphere but open themselves up to various spiritual problems. Nonetheless, some Sufi masters are very loving, tolerant and forbearing with respect to whom is permitted to attend sessions of sacred music.

These shaykhs frequently are prepared to extend their mantle of spiritual kindness and protection over all who attend sacred music sessions regardless of the reasons of the latter for doing so and irrespective of their spiritual condition. Sometimes, however, for the good of all concerned certain people may be discouraged from attending such gatherings.

Finally, not everyone who sings or plays sacred music necessarily has the right attitude or intention. Everything should be done out of love for, and in service to, God and the friends of God.

Unfortunately, some musicians and singers are motivated by other considerations such as money, status, fame and so on. These interests and goals can spoil, or adversely affect, the spiritual atmosphere of sacred music sessions.

When time, place, company, and musicians flow together in a spiritual appropriate manner under the guidance of a Sufi master, all the ingredients are in place for, God willing, spiritual benefit to be derived by the participants in these sessions. Each person receives in her or his own way, according to the individual's capacity and condition, and in accordance with the will of God.

By the grace of God, some people come into a state of spiritual ecstasy during these sessions. This ecstasy may be due to a resonance, induced, in part, by the music and/or singing, which reverberates with the original sound of one's being called into created existence, from non-existence, by God's command: "Kun (Be)!".

Alternatively, the sound which resonates within the individual, through the music and singing, is the echo of our original covenant with God in pre-eternity. In this covenant, God asked the spirits if they acknowledged and accepted God as the only Reality and, therefore, the only one worthy of being loved, cherished, served and worshiped by human beings.

In either case, the individual spirit experiences the intense joy of being freed, even if only temporarily, from the confines of one's "normal" consciousness. The individual is intoxicated with the spiritual wine of being brought into a greater, deeper, richer, and more subtle awareness of God's nearness.

In reality, the reverberations of the sounds of pre-eternity are with us all the time. However, for many different reasons, we do not attend to them and have veiled ourselves from hearing them.

Under the right circumstances, sacred music can tear away these veils. As a result, we can hear the sounds of our spiritual origins once again and experience all the joy and love which accompanies this.

Of course, the fact one does not go into a state of ecstasy does not mean nothing is happening spiritually. Even without ecstasy, listening to sacred music can bring a great sense of peace, comfort, consolation, contentment, and happiness. Sacred music becomes spiritual nutriment for the soul, heart and spirit of the individual.

Sufi masters maintain that for those who are prepared to listen with their hearts, there is a depth of spiritual satisfaction and healing which

comes from sacred music. This kind of satisfaction and healing cannot come from non-sacred music, no matter how beautiful the latter may be.

Sometimes Sufi shaykhs will use sacred music to help an individual overcome various difficulties. For example, an individual may be going through some sort of psychological, emotional or social problem.

The shaykh will arrange for the individual to listen to certain selections of sacred music. In time (the length of which may vary with the individual, the problem and the shaykh), the individual's mood, condition, attitude, and/or motivation may change in a spiritually beneficial direction.

Qawwali is the name given to certain forms of sacred music which exist in India and Pakistan. It features prominently in the Chishti Sufi Order that is centered in Ajmer, India but which now has spread throughout many parts of the world.

"Qawwali" means that which is said or mentioned. This refers to the themes of such sacred music. These themes give expression to insights concerning various aspects of the mystical journey and/or the relationship between, on the one hand, human beings, and, on the other hand, God, Prophets, saints and spiritual guides.

## **Chapter 50**

### **Dependence**

For most of us, being dependent on others is an abhorrent, humiliating situation in which to be. We are brought up, by design and/or accident, to be self-reliant and independent.

Dependence, we feel, is a sign of weakness. It is an admission of failure.

Dependence carries an aura of childhood about it. We are not able to fend for ourselves. Decisions concerning our lives are made by other people.

Rightly or wrongly, dependence seems to be caught up with issues of competence. To be dependent, is to reveal some degree of diminished capacity.

Dependence has negative implications for self-esteem, integrity and honor. Dependence raises unsettling questions about identity.

Sufi masters tend to take a different slant on the issue of dependence. They contend that, given certain provisos, dependence is actually a spiritually desirable condition in which to be.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, the experience of dependence can be quite salutary. For example, the ego vehemently dislikes the condition of dependence. This is so for two reasons.

First, being dependent creates a negative image problem for the ego. The dependent person is frequently looked down on by others. Dependent people are often treated with condescension and contempt.

Dependent people are easily dismissed as people of little, or no, importance. Dependent people are not considered to be the movers and shakers of industry and society.

People of dependence are rarely consulted or sought out for interviews. There is no glitz and glamour associated with dependence. It is not sexy.

For all of the foregoing reasons, the ego considers dependence to be something of a public relations disaster. Whenever the hint of a dependence scandal threatens to raise its ugly head, the ego turns the matter over to its spin doctors.

A second motive behind the intense dislike of the ego for the condition of dependence involves issues of freedom. The ego is happiest when it can do whatever it damn well pleases.

A person in the condition of dependence is, by definition, someone who is under constraint. Such an individual is not free to do whatever she or he would like to do. The extent of the constraints under which an individual operates is an index of that person's degree of dependence.

The ego does not handle restrictions well. Consequently, the prospect of dependence is an anathema to the ego.

To be cognizant of the various threads of dependence which are woven into our lives is very hard on the ego. This awareness is a painful blow to our pride. Such understanding exposes our vulnerabilities. Our egos feel hemmed in by the restrictions on our freedom which are entailed by our different dependencies.

What is bad for the ego is good for the soul. From the perspective of Sufi masters, the condition of dependence helps put us in touch with some fundamental truths. The understanding which is rooted in these truths is very important to the possibility of making spiritual progress on the Sufi path.

The shaykhs of the Sufi way point out that the condition of dependence is, in fact, an accurate reflection of our actual situation in the scheme of things. The more we grow in spiritual understanding, the more we come to realize our essential dependence on God.

The air we breathe, the bodies we inhabit, the clothes we wear, the minds with which we reason, the work we do, the friends we have, the food we eat, the families that care for us, the money we spend, the health we enjoy, the talents from which we benefit, the roof over our head, our laughter, the opportunities which are given to us, and so on, are all from God. We are dependent on God for all of them.

In this sense, none of us are self-made individuals, no matter how much we might like to suppose so to the contrary. This remains true irrespective whether or not we acknowledge the presence of the numerous currents of dependence in our lives.

Sufi masters recommend we seek independence from everything except God. "Things" and people are the loci of manifestation of God's grace ... they are not the source of such grace.



Sufi masters juxtapose two contrasting pictures of the human condition. The more we look to things and/or people and/or ourselves as the solution to our problems, the more entangled in the world and ourselves we will become. Consequently, we will become more deeply immersed in a condition of negative, addictive and problematic dependence.

On the other hand, the more we look to God as the solution to our problems, the less entangled in the world and ourselves we will become. As a result, we will become, God willing, more deeply embedded in a condition of positive, liberating and beneficial dependence.

Dependence is a desirable spiritual condition when the focus of that dependence is exclusively on God. Dependence is an undesirable spiritual condition when one is caught up in the illusion one needs things or people to the exclusion of God.

To be dependent on God, however, does not give one the right to dismiss, or be arrogant toward, the means through which God supports and sustains one. According to the Sufi masters, one should express appreciation and gratitude to the way—be it person or thing, through which God has chosen to lend assistance.

To do so, helps one to develop in humility. This is something else the ego detests since humility is tantamount to admitting dependence.

Independence is a desirable spiritual condition when it is an expression of the realization of our essential freedom from all except God. Independence is an undesirable spiritual condition when it is an expression of the illusion that the ego is free from God, as well as from all things.



## Chapter 51

### Zikr

The remembrance of God (zikr) can take many forms. In whatever form it appears, zikr serves to polish the heart of the practitioner of the Sufi path.

Sufi masters indicate that a heart which is properly polished becomes like a spiritual mirror. If God wishes, a polished heart can reflect various unveilings of Divine manifestation.

Zikr often is given expression through various kinds of chants. Some of these chants consist of short formulae involving different Names and Attributes of God. Other chants involve somewhat longer recitations concerning specific spiritual themes. Quite frequently, these themes revolve about certain Names and Attributes of Divinity.

Some forms of zikr are open-ended and, therefore, can be repeated as few, or as many, times as a person desires. Some forms of zikr are to be repeated only a set number of times.

There are some chants which are said in an audible fashion. There are other chants which are to be said silently.

There are chants which may be said after various required prayers. There are chants that may be said at certain times of day or on particular days of the week. Often times, different Sufi Orders and Branches will emphasize techniques for doing zikr which are not necessarily shared by other Sufi groups. Nonetheless, all of these differences are but variations on essential themes which are observed by all Sufi Orders and Branches.

All forms of zikr call upon God for assistance of one kind or another. Different chants may be prescribed by a Sufi master for an individual to say in order, if God wishes, to alleviate, for example, physical ailments, psychological difficulties, or financial problems.

However, more often than not, the chants of the Sufi path focus on spiritual issues. For instance, an individual may be going through a certain stage and require Divine support or protection in order to be able, successfully, to pass through the trials and challenges of such a spiritual stage.

Thus, the practitioner of the Sufi path may invoke God's assistance in order to become more patient because God is the source

of all patience, and the individual is without any patience of her or his own. Not only does the zikr of patience seek help from God in obtaining the blessing of patience, this zikr also helps the individual to realize his or her impoverished condition concerning patience and many, many other qualities as well.

Alternatively, the individual may be instructed by the shaykh to call on God, through a certain Name of Divinity, to help the individual with some spiritual task. Success and enabling power come only from God, and a particular zikr will both seek such support from God, while also helping the individual to realize her or his complete dependence on God in all matters.

The practitioner of the Sufi path wishes to become completely saturated with the remembrance of God at all times and under all circumstances. Whether the person is: standing, sitting, lying down, at work, relaxing, interacting with others, eating, sleeping, or alone, the Sufi seeks always to be busy with the remembrance of God.

Initially, when the individual first starts out saying zikr, the chant given to the initiate by the spiritual guide may be only on the lips of the individual and no deeper. The beginner's mind and heart often keep losing focus and concentration.

With the help of God, the individual persists. Gradually, by the grace of God, the mind and, then, the heart become engaged in the zikr.

If God wishes, a stage of doing zikr may come in which nothing but the remembrance of God is permitted to enter into the heart. Within us, there are spiritual capacities which, when operating properly through the grace of God, protect the heart from all manner of disruptive intrusions from the world or the ego.

Moreover, if God wishes, there may come a stage beyond the previous stage in which the One doing the chanting is not the individual. Instead, Divinity is chanting, and the individual is merely a witness to this while it takes place.

From the perspective of the Sufi masters, Divinity, of course, is always the One doing zikr. However, most of us are veiled from realizing and understanding the truth of this reality.

Consequently, in one sense, spiritual development is really a series of unveilings in which the person comes to realize, more and more clearly,

that the individual is but a veiled locus of manifestation through which Divinity is being expressed. Zikr is one of the ways for helping to bring about this realization and understanding in the individual.

The individual starts out saying zikr in search of God. In time, if God wishes, the individual becomes witness to the active presence of God in, and through, the zikr.

As such, zikr is a vehicle which is used to travel to its own essence. In other words, zikr is not a matter of just words. It is a matter of the Reality which underwrites those words.

As long as the zikr is only on the tongue or in the mind, the individual will not be opened up to the inner reality of the zikr. Only when the heart becomes alive with zikr will there be a spiritual atmosphere conducive to the zikr becoming alive in the heart.

Although zikr should have God as its *raison d'être*, ironically, many people really have their own egos as the central motif of the zikr. Such people do zikr of the self rather than become a locus of manifestation through which zikr of the Self is done.

This raises a question. If one is reciting the Names of God, how can one be doing zikr of the ego?

When the preoccupations of the mind and the intentions of the heart are seeking other than God, what the lips say has little, or no, value. Quite frequently, these preoccupations and intentions will be cleverly camouflaged by the ego to make them appear spiritual in nature.

The ego wants power, wealth, ease, comfort, status and so on. Zikr is perceived by the ego to be a possible way of getting these things.

When the ego sees a way of exploiting a situation, it can become extremely motivated and committed. If necessary, for example, the ego will chant the Names of God morning, noon and night to get what it wants.

Upon seeing all of the seemingly spiritual activity of an ego-inspired individual, people may become quite impressed. They may begin to think of the individual as a holy person and a friend of God.

Consequently, these people may begin to treat one with respect and deference. If this happens, the ego may feel spiritual etiquette calls for displaying an outward demeanor of humility. Beneath the surface, however,

the ego will be doing cartwheels as it basks in all of the attention and praise of others.

Furthermore, if other people begin to perceive the individual to be a holy person, they may grant that individual authority over their lives and possessions. On the one hand, they might seek out the person's council and live in accordance with such advice, believing the guidance comes, ultimately, from God. On the other hand, people may give the individual gifts, food, money and property as tenders for future, spiritual considerations.

People may seek to serve the "holy person" because they believe the individual to be a friend of God. As a result, they may provide all manner of ease and comfort to the individual in the hope they might receive blessings from God through the 'holy person'.

Under the foregoing circumstances, the reciting of zikr is not about God. The reciting of zikr is about the ambitions, desires and agenda of the ego.

Zikr of the ego can assume extremely subtle forms. For instance, even an individual's belief that it is "I" who says a given chant constitutes a zikr of the ego. This is so because the ego is trying to take credit for something which it does not have the capacity to do.

The gift of true zikr comes only from God. The ego is merely trying to pass off counterfeit activity for the genuine currency of zikr.

Nevertheless, one must start somewhere. In the beginning, one cannot avoid the fact that, in many respects, one's zikr is infused with many properties of the ego.

Consequently, one should pray that God grants one the pure, sincere intention to seek to have the zikr of the ego transformed into the zikr of the Self. Through God's help, in the form of, among other things, the spiritual guide, such an intention invites transformation to come into the heart of the individual and, God willing, to eliminate all aspects of the zikr of the ego.

The transition away from zikr of the ego and toward zikr of the Self is, if God wishes, accompanied by a variety of stages of transformation in the spiritual heart of the individual. These changes correspond with, God willing, the realizing of different spiritual potentials within the heart as the individual persists in doing whatever chants are given by the spiritual guide.

Among these transformations, are the following: One stage involves a purification of the heart which leads to faith becoming a way of knowing certain things are true and not just an acceptance of the truth of those things. Another dimension of the heart's potential, concerns compassion for, and love of, human beings. Indeed, one of the aspects of Sufi masters which many people find particularly appealing is the tremendous love and compassion for all of creation which is, through the grace of God, demonstrated by Sufi shaykhs.

A third facet of the heart's spiritual capacity which may be realized involves a further transformation of faith. Instead of just knowing through faith, the individual, if God wishes, is actually able to see various Divine realities through faith.

A fourth dimension of the spiritual potential of the heart revolves around love for the Divine Presence which becomes manifest in the hearts of those who are blessed by God in this manner. God has said that although the whole universe does not contain Divinity, nonetheless, the heart of a believing servant of God does contain Divinity.

There are additional spiritual capacities of the heart which may become manifest by means of the purification process that, God willing, comes through doing zikr. These spiritual potentials of the heart concern different modes of unveiling.

Some of these unveilings involve various dimensions of the realm of the unseen. Other unveilings give expression to the spiritual illumination which comes through the lights of manifestation of Divine Attributes.





**Chapter 52****Beliefs**

Beliefs are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they may provide a heuristic framework through which to explore experience and derive meaning and value from those aspects of reality with which we interact. On the other hand, beliefs also have the capacity to place limits on the kind of meaning and value we can generate as a function of experience. Thus, beliefs simultaneously establish degrees of freedom as well as impose constraints.

For example, if one believes in atheism, the structure of this belief provides one with a spectrum of possibilities (i.e., degrees of freedom) with respect to how one might derive meaning and value from experience. However, at the same time, the nature of the character of this belief in atheism prevents one (i.e., places constraints on one) from seriously entertaining any idea involving claims that God is, in any sense, real.

The structure of any belief gives expression to a set of parameters which establish what is, for that belief, either permissible or impermissible. Such parameters of permissibility provide one with a framework for determining whether, and in what way, other beliefs are compatible or inconsistent with such a belief.

Science, history, theology, and philosophy each have their own unique ways of: creating, exploring, questioning, linking and evaluating different beliefs. In each instance, the beliefs being discussed give expression to both degrees of freedom and limitations.

Furthermore, while beliefs have the potential to help us to make some sort of contact with reality, beliefs can just as easily distance us from the truth of things. We all face the difficult, complex task of trying to differentiate: those beliefs which tell us something important—and, hopefully, true—about the nature of reality, from those beliefs which merely obfuscate matters and place obstacles in our way.

The fact we believe something to be the case does not make it so. In addition, just because we may have a feeling of certainty associated with a given belief, this does not necessarily constitute proof such a belief is true. Alternatively, the mere existence of doubts or reservations in relation to a given belief does not automatically mean the belief is not true.

Beliefs saturate our conceptual life. We have beliefs about who we are, and we have beliefs about whether or not life ultimately has any purpose. We have beliefs about what values we ought to have, and we have beliefs about how one goes about proving something. We have beliefs about origins, and we have beliefs about ends.

Beliefs color the intentions and motivations through which we engage ourselves, others and the universe.

Beliefs shape our attitudes. Beliefs mediate between us and the world.

We are attracted to some beliefs and not others. Sometimes this attraction is a matter of the way in which a belief seems to reflect our own experience and helps to organize such experience in a useful way.

Sometimes we are drawn to certain beliefs because they are capable of seducing us by exploiting various needs, desires, and/or weaknesses we have. Sometimes beliefs become influential in our lives because of the manner in which they address our fears or anxieties or hopes.

Sometimes beliefs have an aesthetic appeal for us, and we fall under the spell of their beauty. Sometimes a belief appeals to us because it is compatible with our temperament or personality. Sometimes a belief attracts us because it seems to confer a sense of uniqueness on us which helps set us apart as being superior to, or better than, other people.

Examining the roots of our beliefs can be a valuable exercise. On the other hand, this can be a profoundly disturbing undertaking as well.

We tend to believe that we believe what we do because those beliefs are, in some sense, true. We feel our beliefs accurately reflect, more or less, the way things are in reality.

Consequently, if we should discover we believe what we do not because it expresses the truth but because the belief suits our personality or temperament or needs or fears or hopes or other vested interests, then, suddenly, our whole world is thrown into turmoil and confusion. This is so because we no longer are who we believed ourselves to be. This is so because we must now re-evaluate our whole relationship with existence. We need to do this because, up until now, the nature of our relationship with existence has been mediated by a set of beliefs which no longer means what we believed, heretofore, to be the case.

Even if the belief(s) in question is (are) true, as long as our motivations for holding them are due to something besides the purported truth of those ideas, there are problems which emerge. These problems revolve around issues of integrity, sincerity, honesty, purpose, intention and identity.

We have many kinds of belief about God. These beliefs may be true or they may not be true. Or, perhaps, some aspects of the beliefs may be true, while other aspects of such beliefs may be false.

Furthermore, we have many reasons, other than matters of purported truth, for holding on to such beliefs. There are psychological reasons for believing. There are social, economic and political reasons for believing. There are philosophical reasons for believing. There are theological reasons for believing. There are emotional reasons for believing. There are personal and experiential reasons for believing.

All of these reasons for holding different kinds of belief concerning the nature of God often involve advantages or benefits to be gained by believing God exists. Moreover, the reasons for believing, also presuppose God exists. If this were not the case, then our various reasons for believing would be arguing: from nowhere, to nowhere.

The Sufi masters maintain we must rid ourselves of our thoughts of advantages, benefits and vested interests when we approach God. The beliefs we have concerning God should be pure in intention and, therefore, they should be devoid of all expectations for any kind of return on our beliefs. The beliefs we have should be rooted in an unconditional submission.

The practitioners of the Sufi path proclaim that God's love for all of us is unconditional. Thus, God's love does not depend on whether we believe or do not believe in Divinity. Furthermore, such love is not predicated on our belief having a certain structural form.

From the Sufi perspective, unconditional love calls out for unconditional love. If our beliefs are entangled in reasons, advantages and benefits, then such beliefs are not rooted in the pure intentionality of unconditional love.

On the Sufi path, considerable attention is devoted to the purification of the intentions associated with our beliefs. Under the watchful and knowing eye of the spiritual teacher, we must examine, very

carefully and very critically, the character of our intention with respect to God.

If our intention is colored by hopes, fears, desires, anxieties, expectations, and so on, then we are seeking something besides God. Nothing but God should be the focus of our intention.

The Sufi masters carry the matter one substantial step further. Ultimately, one should not approach God through beliefs but through Divinity. For, beliefs constitute a modality of separation between the seeker and the Sought.

Therefore, at a certain point along the Sufi path, the reality to which beliefs allude must be experienced directly. Beliefs, qua beliefs, must fall away.

## **Chapter 53**

### **Identity**

To go through life and never know who one is, this is a tragedy, both of modern as well as ancient times. Yet, most of us would rather hold on to the ignorance and darkness of our egos instead of risk experiencing the temporary psychological and emotional discomfort which may be necessary to seek and discover the truth about ourselves. In our heart of hearts, even if we might not be willing to admit so to others, many of us realize that one of the primary activities of our egos is to generate misery, difficulty and heartache, both for ourselves as well as others. Yet, we permit ourselves and others to be subjugated to its cruel reign of tyranny again and again and again.

In fact, we are such slaves to, and in fear of, our egos, we are willing to forego all chance of having real, essential purpose, meaning and identity enter into our lives. We would rather continue to permit ourselves to be crushed beneath the constant cravings and selfishness of our respective false selves.

We live in the darkest shadows of a king or queen who rules arbitrarily and consistently uses tactics of manipulation, coercion, terrorism, corruption, seduction and bribery. We dream of escape or revolution, but we cannot bring ourselves to take the steps to journey toward being our own person. We prefer the binding chains shackling us to the identity of the false self, over the efforts required to learn how to use the keys within us to unlock our chains forever.

We shy away from our spiritual identities because we believe this would condemn us to some sort of slavery to Divinity. Yet, we have these worries while we go about busily degrading ourselves as a lackey and a thrall of our false selves.

The false self tells us: "Come with me, and you will be free of God". However, the false self never explains how we are to be free of it.

At best, the false self is like an air traffic control system. As we leave one sector of our being, the ego will turn us over to the appropriate controller in the next sector. Nonetheless, all of the controllers are part and parcel of the same controlling system of the false self. They merely have different names, titles and appearances.

We never will be permitted to fly without filing a flight plan with, and getting approval from, the air traffic control system of the ego. The only flight plans which will receive approval are those traveling along the network of habitual routes laid down by the dialectic of passion and anger.

To control, ourselves or others, is in the nature of the ego. Any inclinations we may have to seek our essential identity will always be resisted by the ego.

Many aspects of modern, and ancient, philosophical, religious, psychological, and scientific thinking is, and has been, directed toward exploring the issue of human identity. Who are we as individuals? Who are we collectively? What does it mean to be a human being?

What is entailed by, or follows from, the human condition? Where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the meaning and purpose, if any, of human existence?

There are many conceptual and psychological currents which shape our interpretation of the nature of identity and the sort of role it plays, or should play, in our lives. Religion, culture, socio-economic status, family life, education, career, race, ethnicity, age, gender, personal history, sexual orientation, nationality, success, and failure are all thought to have significant contributing roles in the shaping of identity.

From the perspective of the Sufi masters, most of the "normal" ways of addressing the problem of identity often are preoccupied with largely marginal, if not illusory, considerations. More specifically, according to Sufi masters, we are all born with an innate spiritual nature and identity. However, our parents (and, by extension, our families, communities, schools, countries and ourselves) make us into something other than what is indicated by our indigenous spiritual identity.

Furthermore, practitioners of the Sufi path maintain all people are equal before God. Part of the meaning of this equality is that, from the perspective of Divinity, qualities such as: race, ethnicity, language, power, gender, status, fame, wealth, education, beauty and so on, play no role in matters of gaining spiritual proximity, so to speak, to God.

The elimination of the foregoing qualities from our spiritual curriculum vitae means those properties have nothing to do with spiritual identity in and of itself. On the other hand, such qualities do constitute a network of tests, trials, challenges, traps, opportunities and obstacles which must be successfully navigated in order to arrive at the real core of identity—namely, our essential spiritual nature.

We can know who we are: ethnically, racially, religiously, educationally, socio-economically, historically, nationally, sexually, culturally, and politically. Nonetheless, according to Sufi masters, all of this is useless information because, in and of itself, such information does not help us to realize, ontologically, who we are in any spiritually essential sense.

To the extent we get bogged down in these sorts of "identity" issues, then all of our energies, time, resources, efforts and focus will be diverted from discovering the real source and nature of our identity. Moreover, entanglements in all of the foregoing sorts of traditional "identity" issues just become venues for getting lost, confused, frustrated and seduced with respect to what our more fundamental purposes, goals, and needs of life should be.

Such preoccupations are not in our best spiritual interests. Furthermore, in light of all the bloodshed and misery which is generated through conflicts and antagonisms involving these trappings of "identity", this kind of identity preoccupation is not in the best spiritual interests of our families, communities, countries or the world.

Each of us has a unique spiritual identity. The nature of that identity may share certain common dimensions with the spiritual identity of others, but at the heart of our spiritual identity, there is a reality which is shared by no other created thing or being.

Our individual uniqueness is rooted in the Realities of the Names and Attributes of God. Among other things, the Sufi path is intended, God willing, to guide the individual to the full unfolding of the spiritual capacity

which constitutes our uniqueness. If this happens, then we will come to know the truth and reality of whom, what, why and how we are.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, when we come to experience our essential identities, we will come to the realization of certain truths about human beings. Among these truths, are the following:

(1) All of our attributes are borrowed from, or on loan from, the treasure house of Divine Names and Attributes.

(2) Our essential identity and nature is hidden as a mystery or secret of God within the Divine Names and Attributes.

(3) Until this *sirr-illahi*, or mystery of God, is unveiled, we cannot know our true selves and, therefore, we will not know real freedom.

(4) The purpose and meaning of our lives only will be known by us with the full unfolding of our essential identity.

(5) We will be incapable of properly fulfilling our duties and responsibilities as God's vicegerent with respect to the rest of Creation, as long as we do not know, in the fullest sense possible, who we are essentially.

(6) If we do not realize our essential, spiritual identities, we will never understand in any direct, transcendental, experiential manner, that only God has reality and that Divine Attributes, Names, Actions and Effects are but manifestations made possible by the sole reality of Divine Essence.

(7) If we do not fully experience our spiritual identities, our understanding concerning the nature of the meaning of servanthood, which is at the core of our true selves, always will be defective.



## **Chapter 54**

### **Death**

We are born to die. Just like managers are hired to be fired, we have been programmed for death. Death is in our nature, and birth is the first step toward fulfilling that nature.

Someone once said the only certainties in life are death and taxes. This is no longer true. With the advent of shelters, legal specialists, clever accountants, and just your ordinary, garden variety, old-fashioned brand of cheating, taxes are no longer a certainty for some of us.

Death, on the other hand, cannot be cheated. There are no havens and shelters which permit death to be written off as life is depreciated over time.

There are no clever accountants who can set up the ledgers so we can avoid paying death what is due. There are no legal loopholes which permit us to slip past death's auditing process.

Death is very egalitarian. Death offers a flat rate system in which everyone owes and pays the same fixed fee.

The intransigent nature of death has not stopped some people from desperately seeking to discover ways to circumvent the inevitable. Cryogenics, traveling at the speed of light, intense gravitational fields, magic, and the occult are just a few of the possibilities being explored in the hope of having the last laugh at death's expense.

Some people praise the quality of longevity which is believed to come from certain kinds of diet. Some talk about the life-prolonging properties of various roots and herbs. Medicine and other health fields trumpet their capacity to push back death's appointment with us.

Even if there were some modicum of truth in the above claims, none of these remedies has the quality of sufficiency. Sufficiency belongs to God alone.

God may choose, on certain occasions, to work through diet or roots or medicine in order to sustain life. However, diets or roots or medicine, on their own, are not sufficient to effect any benefits whatsoever unless God wishes this to be so.

The origins of causality do not begin with the properties of diets, roots and medicine. Rather, diets, roots and medicine have the properties they do so that, on occasion, they may be a venue for God's grace.

In other words, the inherent nature of various diets, roots, herbs, and medicines is in having a capacity to transmit certain kinds of benefit upon God's command. In the absence of God's authorization, no benefit is conferred.

We try different things because we have learned that in the past such things have been associated with, say, health or long life. We begin to believe the "magic" is in the thing and fail to understand the thing is merely the locus of manifestation for God's grace. The thing is merely that which God calls upon, from time to time, to serve as a certain kind of medium of transmission.

Many people follow diets, or they consume herbs and roots on a regular basis, or they receive medical treatment, or they take all manner of vitamins and minerals, and, yet, the benefits are limited or non-existent. Not everyone benefits equally, if at all.

Should one infer from the foregoing that one is a fool to seek assistance in the form of a diet or herbs or medical treatment? The answer to this question is: no!

By all means, try to find those remedies and health aides which have a strong track record, so to speak, for being a venue for the transmission of certain kinds of benefit. Nonetheless, one also should keep in mind and heart the following understanding: whether or not the remedy works, and to what extent, is up to God.

People who are attempting to discover the secret passageway to immortality make the mistake of believing death is fixed by the properties of things rather than by the decree of God. Such people believe creation is somehow independent of the Creator. As a result, they tend to believe the invention or the discovery of an elixir of life is but a matter of the appropriate technology of exploitation.

We fear death, yet there is a lot of confusion and uncertainty interspersed with our fears. Do we fear death -- in and of itself -- or do we fear death for what may come before and after the moment of our demise?

For example, some people are quite prepared to accept death per se, but do not look forward to the pain and suffering which may precede it. Since

death marks a cessation of such physical difficulty, death actually would bring its own strange form of comfort and relief.

Some people are obsessed with the moment of death. Is it painful? Do we gasp for breath? Do we experience life draining from our consciousness? Will panic seize us as we become aware of our imminent termination?

Since physical death is a once in a lifetime occurrence, we don't know quite how to brace ourselves for it. On the other hand, death may be like a lot of things in life—different than we thought it would be.

Speculating about the experiential character of the moment of death is just that: speculation. Everyone dies in her or his own way, and we won't know what that way is until we do it.

Should we take the advice of the poet who said we ought not to go gentle into that good night? How should we play the death scene? Like some method actor, we look for our motivation in order to know how we should respond to our exit cue. Our motivation will be shaped and colored by the significance we give to the purpose of both life and death.

Some of us fear what comes after death. Maybe, for example, there is nothing after death except a death that is oblivious to the universe and to itself.

The upside of the foregoing possibility is such oblivion is not conducive to regrets or nostalgia. We won't know what we are missing and, better yet, we won't care. Nothing is to be feared in this.

Of course, another consideration is death merely marks a transition from one mode of conscious existence to another mode of conscious existence. This is kind of a good news/bad news situation.

The good news is: there may be eternal life after death. The bad news is: we may not like what is eternally ours.

The latter case would seem to be a worthy candidate for some degree of trepidation. We may fear death as a harbinger of something much more unpleasant. Since we have difficulty fixating our fear on an amorphous cloud of unknowing, we find the concreteness of death a suitable object in which to invest our fears.

The Sufi masters look upon death in variety of ways. All of these perspectives carry important implications for the manner in which one goes about living life.

To begin with, for practitioners of the Sufi path, death is a necessary constraint on the arrogance of human beings. Death is indisputable proof we are not in charge of things.

Death gives expression to determinate limits on our existence. This is so since no matter how powerful, famous, rich, beautiful, talented or handsome we may be, we will be humbled in death.

If we realize, with our heart and soul, our vulnerability, we will not be so likely to become arrogant. The realities of the tenuousness of our situation will help us to be humble and modest in our demeanor.

Secondly, Sufi masters indicate death introduces a valuable dimension of tension into our lives. We have only a limited amount of time to accomplish whatever we can in this life.

Indeed, some of us have less time than others. Few, if any, of us know how much time we have left.

We ought to strive to be as efficient as possible with the time we have. Consequently, we should be focused and purposeful in what we do.

The fleeting nature of time serves as a reminder that death has come one step closer with each breath we take. Death can be our ally in this regard, encouraging and urging us to take advantage of the time we have.

Death can say to us: "Look! I am powerless just like you. I go to where I am ordered, and only when I am ordered to do so. For your own sake, do what must be done before I am sent to you."

From the perspective of the Sufi masters, one should look forward to the time of death. Death frees us from the problems of this world and brings us into closer proximity to the beauty and majesty of God. Since realizing the closeness of God is an essential component to the purpose of our existence, death is the lane way which leads to the fulfillment of our essential purpose.

Death stands as the gate which veils our Beloved from us. Eager anticipation should characterize our attitudes toward the moment when God opens the gate which will usher us into the Divine presence.

Finally, the teachers of the Sufi path maintain there is a way through which we can prepare for our moment of physical death. If we undergo this preparation, we will be able to embrace physical death with equanimity.

The method of preparation involves dying to our own desires, attachments, and passions. We must die to our egos. We must die to our addictions to the world.

If we can die this greater death, then, according to the Sufi masters, we will be as ready as we can be for physical death and whatever comes after it. Unfortunately, most of us are in far deeper denial concerning the necessity for this kind of spiritual death than we are in denial concerning the fact that physical death is bearing down on us like a freight train with a schedule to keep.



## Chapter 55

### Gratitude

Sufi masters indicate the sign of gratitude to God is sincerity. They further indicate the signs of sincerity are: commitment to, constancy with, and consistency in the active realization of a seriousness of spiritual purpose.

If we wish to give thanks for the grace which has come to us from Divinity, we should find a way of doing so which will demonstrate our thanks is truly heartfelt. Furthermore, we should find a way of showing gratitude that has a form and content which is pleasing to the One to Whom it is being offered. This is all part of the adab or spiritual etiquette of expressing gratitude.

We, of course, could simply say to God: "Thank You!". We could do this and feel it deeply. This might be a minimal form of intentional acknowledgment of Divine kindness and generosity. However, as the saying notes: "Talk is cheap".

Why not put a little, or a lot, more effort in to our expression of gratitude? Why not put some thought, care, consideration, planning, and imagination into our act of thanks?

For instance, we might begin by refraining from trying to figure out what is the least we can do which will still meet the requirements of spiritual etiquette. Such thinking tends to undermine the alleged sincerity of our expression of thanks.

There is nothing which demands an expression of gratitude must be restricted to a single act. Multiple acts of thanks, even if the acts are small, indicate a state of mind and heart in which gratitude lingers on over time. There is a definite taste of sincerity to this.

Some of us consider the etiquette of gratitude to be somewhat burdensome. It weighs heavily on us. We resent its presence.

Is God just putting us in one of those embarrassing social situations in which something is done for us, and, now, we have to reciprocate? Otherwise, if we don't do something in return, this makes us look bad, and we feel awkward?

Should we just send a card? If we get a gift, how much should we spend?

We don't want to send the wrong message. If we do, we could be back in the same predicament all too quickly.

The whole thing could escalate. We might have to invite God to tea or lunch or something.

Consequently, we sometimes seek to find a way of discharging this responsibility as quickly as we can. However, we do so, not out of a sense of sincere thanks but in order to rid ourselves of the burden we feel.

We are doing ourselves a favor rather than showing gratitude. The form of what we do has the look of thanksgiving, but the inner meaning and spirit of what we do is just for us. Thanks, but no thanks!

To reflect on the sort of things we could do which might be most enjoyable to the One to Whom we want to express gratitude, suggests a certain degree of sincerity. To do this effectively, we have to think about our relationship with God.

Who is God? Who are we? Why is God doing these things for us? What do we mean to God? What does God mean to us? What, if anything, would God like receiving from us?

What do we give to the One Who has everything? Has God dropped any hints as to what might be a nice way of showing gratitude?

According to the Sufi masters, God has sent 124,000 Prophets with spiritual guidance for humanity. The guidance was given in order to help us find our way back to God in a spiritually appropriate manner and condition.

This guidance is a gift of love from God to us. This gift is in addition to the ones which have come to us through our being, consciousness, intelligence, will, hearing, seeing and speech. In addition, of course, God gives us a continuous allotment of gifts in the form of: food, shelter, clothes, jobs, money, families, friends, and health.

These gifts are all related. Existence, guidance and maintenance are given for a specific purpose. That purpose entails learning how to love, serve and worship God.

This purpose itself is a gift. It is given not for God's benefit but for our benefit.



We are the ones with something to gain if we fulfill the purpose for which all the other gifts have been given. The Sufi masters are all agreed: God is entirely independent of any needs in relation to human beings.

Whether or not we worship, love and serve God will cause God neither profit nor loss. We will be the sole losers or beneficiaries in this matter.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, the form of gratitude which is most pleasing to God is to follow the Divine guidance which has been sent to us through: the books of revelation, the Prophets, the saints and spiritual guides. By following guidance, one shows appreciation and gratitude for everything which has been given to us. This is so because we are using everything in the way God wished for those gifts to be used.

There are two broad ways in which we can follow guidance. We can do so reluctantly and with misgivings. Or, we actually can try to enjoy the process.

There is something inherently just and right about showing gratitude for gifts received. Furthermore, the reciprocity of friends and lovers has an enjoyable charm in its own right.

If one's heart is in the right place, there will be a natural joy which comes with showing gratitude in the manner outlined by the Sufi masters. Both of the foregoing attitudes will color, shape and orient the character of the behaviors we perform to give expression to our gratitude.



## Chapter 56

### Betrayal

We live in an age of betrayal. This disease has diffused into virtually every nook and cranny of society. There are few, if any, people whose lives have not been affected, in one way or another, by its presence. In fact, for the vast majority of us, betrayal comes at us from a wide variety of angles, both from within, as well as from outside of, us.

Husbands betray wives, and wives betray husbands. The nature of the betrayal involves more than sexual infidelities, although that is, in itself, a source of deep injury and trauma. Husbands and wives also betray one another when they lose interest in the other person as a human being and, therefore, become increasingly open to sacrificing their spouse's essential needs for purely transitory, worldly gains or material/sensory gratification.

Parents betray children when they abuse them sexually, physically, and emotionally. Parents betray children when they abdicate responsibility for nurturing the developmental well-being of the child and turn that task over to television or expect schools to accomplish the task unassisted. Parents betray children by drifting into drug and alcohol induced stupors, as well as career addictions, bequeathing to their children little more than a psychological, emotional and spiritual wasteland.

Elected officials betray voters through failure to keep their promises. Elected officials betray their constituents by placing their own interests above that of the people they are suppose to serve.

Elected officials betray their communities by allowing the special interests of the few to take precedence over the needs of the many. Elected officials betray their supporters by becoming involved in politics rather than implementing the true spirit of public service.

Native peoples in North America have been betrayed consistently by governments and non-Native people. In fact, indigenous people everywhere in the world have been betrayed by their non-indigenous "neighbors".

Corporations have betrayed their workers by exposing the latter to all matter of hazardous, unsafe and toxic working conditions. Adding insult to injury, many of these same corporations do not offer a fair day's wage for a fair day's labor.

Many companies have betrayed the communities in which they reside as a result of being more concerned about profits than the pollution and ecological destruction which underwrites those profits. Corporations have betrayed the communities in which they exist through the manner in which they threaten, badger, corrupt and terrorize those communities in order to get tax-breaks, as well as government concessions concerning the enforcement of regulations involving safety and pollution.

Lawyers betray their clients when they violate their fiduciary responsibilities to the latter. These betrayals range from: embezzling funds; to cutting deals which are not necessarily in their clients' best interests; to going through the motions and, thereby cheating their clients of commitment, energy and an effort worthy of the money they are being paid. Lawyers have betrayed the communities in which they practice by helping to create and perpetuate the mess that we call our judicial system.

More than a few therapists have betrayed their clients. More than a few doctors have betrayed their patients. More than a few banks have betrayed their customers. More than a few educators have betrayed their students. More than a few religious leaders have betrayed their congregations. More than a few leaders have betrayed their countries. More than one race has betrayed people of other races. More than a few papers have betrayed their readers. More than a few pro-athletes have betrayed their fans. More than a few friends have betrayed their comrades.

Seemingly, there is no end to the list of betrayals which shape, color and modulate so much of our lives. However, there exists one kind of betrayal without which none of the foregoing myriad forms of betrayals likely would occur.

Most of us betray ourselves. We betray our essence. We betray our spiritual potential. We betray our true identities. We betray our humanity. We betray our integrity and character and honor. We betray our relationship with God.

One cannot betray others unless one has first betrayed oneself. Once one has betrayed oneself, everyone else is relatively easy.

If one is willing to betray oneself, who does not become a target of opportunity for such treachery? If one cannot prevent oneself from betraying oneself, how can one stop oneself from betraying other people?

We betray others and ourselves through our insensitivities and selfishness. We betray others and ourselves through our emotional immaturity.

We betray others and ourselves through our broken promises, commitments and undertakings. We betray others and ourselves through the absence of love in our lives.

We betray others and ourselves through our failure to be forgiving, patient, honest, forbearing, compassionate and generous. We betray others and ourselves through our refusal to be understanding and encouraging and supportive.

The Sufi path is designed to assist the individual to learn, among other things, how to stop betraying himself or herself. Sufi masters help us to become aware of the sources of such betrayal, as well as help us to become sensitized to the way in which the betrayal process works.

Through God's blessings of support, the teachers of the Sufi path lead people toward an understanding of what self-respect and self-esteem entail. Once we come to an essential appreciation of what and who the true self is, we will have developed, God willing, a powerful antidote to the disease of betraying ourselves and others.

The terrible condition of the world is as it is because our spiritual conditions are what they are. Each person is responsible for his or her contribution of betrayal to the day-to-day life of the world.

If we want the world to change, we must first change ourselves. We must learn how to stop betraying ourselves so that we can stop betraying others.



## Chapter 57

### Ascension

Ascension is any spiritual experience which brings one closer to God. However, because God is always near, ascension involves any spiritual experience that brings one to a realization, of whatever degree, of God's nearness. In this sense, ascension involves a falling away of the veils obstructing the individual's awareness and understanding with respect to the intimate presence of God in our lives.

Since there are thousands of veils of darkness and ignorance and density which obscure our relationship with God, there can be many different kinds of ascension. Just because one has had certain experiences in which some of these veils are lifted, does not mean one has realized the presence of God to the fullest extent possible.

There can be much confusion about this on the Sufi path in particular, and with mystical journeys in general. More specifically, there have been instances in which people have had one, or more, intense spiritual experiences and concluded, incorrectly, that all veils between themselves and God had been removed. These are very subtle matters in which one can be easily led astray unless one clings tightly to the garment of the counsel of one's spiritual guide.

One can be making progress on the spiritual path and still be in considerable ignorance and darkness. Indeed, this is part and parcel of what a path is. It is a way filled with: twists and turns; hills and valleys, as well as dangers and places of relative safety.

One may come to know something of the portions of the path one has traversed or is currently traveling through. Nonetheless, what lies ahead is largely unknown.

There is often a very strong tendency on the part of travelers to believe—due to imperfections such as impatience, pride or arrogance—that they are near, or at, journey's end. Consequently, such people believe they have ascended to the heights of spiritual possibility.

However, as has been said in another context: "It ain't over 'til it's over". The spiritual journey is a very long one.

In fact, from a certain perspective, there really is no end to the process of ascension. God is infinite and, therefore, can be engaged through ever-new modalities of spiritual experience.

Some experiences of ascension are short-lived. They are transitory states which descend on the individual in the blink of an eye and may depart just as quickly. Such experiences may range from: the momentary feeling of compassion one may have for another human being, to flashes of insight which may be bestowed on the individual concerning some aspect of one's spiritual life or the nature of existence.

Some experiences of ascension last longer and may mark important way stations along the path. Qualities of: repentance, longing, patience, dependence, gratitude and love, when absorbed into the fabric of the individual's life, can all give expression to significant experiences of ascension.

Sometimes we are raised up to a certain height by the Grace of God, only to be lowered down again. Sometimes this happens as a sort of foretaste of what is to come at a later time in a more permanent manner. Sometimes this occurs in order to motivate the individual to struggle harder. Sometimes it is done to show the individual what might have been but will never be due to some flaw in that individual.

There are occasions in which people are transported tremendous spiritual distances as a pure gift of God's Grace. Unfortunately, people respond to this possibility in different ways.

Some try to make such a gift a function of causality in which they are somehow deserving recipients due to their character or devotions or the like. Such people fail to understand that gift's of Grace are entirely independent of considerations of being deserved. One could be a scoundrel and still be the beneficiary of God's magnanimity.

Other people hear about the possibility of what amounts to a "free lunch", spiritually speaking, and become like members of some modern day cargo cult. They just sit and wait for the Grace to descend and do nothing in the mean time, allowing their lives to slip away into stagnation and indolence.

On the spiritual path, one is either: ascending, descending, or standing still. If one is standing still, the slippery slope of descent is dangerously close by. If one is descending, reversing course may not always be possible.

Sometimes experiences of spiritual ascent are, from a certain perspective, a curse in disguise. This is so in those instances when a



person permits his or her ego to assert its acquisitive nature and claim the experience for its own.

The desires of the ego undermine the whole purpose of the process of spiritual ascent. This process is designed to diminish, if not eliminate, one's awareness of the presence of the ego, while enhancing awareness of the presence of God.

This draws attention to one of the biggest obstacles—and some might say the only obstacle—on the path of ascent toward God, namely: our awareness of ourselves as beings separate from God. This awareness disguises itself in many different ways at various points along the path. In fact, we are so good at deluding ourselves that the very quest for spirituality can be feeding our ego rather than our essential selves.

In the foregoing sense, we all are truly our own worst enemies as far as spiritual ascent is concerned. Like golf duffers, we want to see how far we have hit the spiritual ball and what this says about us as individuals. We would be much better off paying attention to form, technique and discipline, and let the distance factor take care of itself.

Quite frequently, people—even people on the Sufi path -- have a distorted idea about the process of spiritual ascension. We read about the wondrous, reason-defying deeds of some of the practitioners of the path, and fantasize about having such powers and abilities ourselves. Sometimes we get so caught-up in all the talk about miracles that the idea of spiritual ascent becomes, in our minds and hearts, reduced down to being nothing more than this.

To put the foregoing in perspective, one Sufi has indicated there are at least 100 stages to the spiritual path. The capacity to be a locus of manifestation for miracles weighs in at about the 17th stage.

If one's spiritual horizons are limited to this aspect of things, one will be deprived of the other 83 stages of spiritual ascent. In short, one will have completely misunderstood the nature and purpose of the spiritual path by getting mesmerized by peripheral matters involving miraculous deeds.

The spiritually mature people of the Sufi path consider such powers and gifts to be, at best, distractions, and, at worst, severe tests of one's spiritual character. From time to time, and for various constructive purposes, such powers and gifts may be exercised.

Among Sufi masters, however, the tendency to use the gifts of God is done sparingly. This is so, God willing, one will not become seduced by, and preoccupied with, such activities rather than concentrating on the real business of the path—becoming more and more immersed in the nearness and presence of God in one's life.

Spiritual ascent is about the process of coming to know one's essential self and how that dimension of being is capable of reflecting the Names and Attributes of God. To realize this kind of knowledge, and to engage existence through such knowledge, and to act in the light of that knowledge, is to fulfill the purpose of the quest for spiritual ascension.

## Chapter 58

### Commitment

Many of us dislike being tied down. We like to keep our options open.

We don't want to have to live with the regret of missed opportunities. We want to be in a position of being free to maximize our returns without having previous commitments getting in the way to spoil, or complicate, matters.

Consequently, many of us hedge our bets. We deal in semi-commitments. For example, we might indicate to someone we'll do something with that person providing certain other things don't happen.

If we say this to enough people, we are pretty much free to wait and see what develops. We, then, can go with the most attractive bid on the table, or we can go where the mood takes us, or both.

There are strong currents of transience and tenuousness in many of our relationships with other people. Our allegiances tend to shift a lot in response to changing circumstances.

We are constantly evaluating the worth of our links with others. A great deal of this evaluation is a function of the ambivalence we feel toward people.

We are attracted to them in some ways, but we have reason(s) to avoid them as well. Sometimes we can't make up our minds if we want to be with various people or not.

Semi-commitments are a very useful way of dealing with such situations. Nothing definite is said. No promises are made. No commitments are given. However, when the appointed time comes, and if the given event or meeting or gathering serves our purposes or needs or mood or agenda or interests, then we can exploit it and deign to show up.

Semi-commitments are exercises in disposability. Semi-commitments are ways of killing time or stalling or buying time. When they have served their ephemeral purpose, they disappear.

Semi-commitments are buffers we set between ourselves and commitment. They provide ready excuses for why we have no time for important issues.

Semi-commitments are ways of filling out our existential dance card until something more interesting comes along. We are constantly using semi-commitments of passing fancy to bump from that card other semi-commitments with which we have become bored or annoyed.

We live in a world which increasingly is advocating we become committed only to semi-commitments. The accelerating rate of technological, economical, political, educational and cultural change are placing more and more pressure on us to avoid getting bogged down in long-term commitments.

Everything is grist for the spinning wheels of semi-commitment. Spouse, family, honor, environment, integrity, identity, purpose, and friends can all be accommodated.

Increasingly, we are being sucked into a nightmarish version of 'Let's Make a Deal'. We can, for instance, keep whatever self-respect we currently may have in our hands, or we can take what is behind door number one.

To make things a little more interesting, we can have what's in this envelope or the box on the table. Moreover, once we choose, we will be asked if we want to keep what we have or exchange it for the contents behind curtains two and three.

The deals are being updated on a daily, if not an hourly, basis. Indeed, the siege of the Information Age has ensured that the deals are changing at the rate of nanoseconds or faster.

Surely, commitment is a liability in such an environment. The future is not plastics. The future is semi-commitments.

The relationship between, on the one hand, a Sufi master or shaykh and, on the other hand, a student or devotee will not flourish in an atmosphere of semi-commitments. This is as true for the teacher as it is for the initiate.

The shaykh is well aware of the bi-directional character of the dimension of commitment at the time of initiation. The student often is only dimly aware of the ramifications of initiation for the issue of commitment.

In fact, more often than not, the student's initial idea of commitment is really more akin to semi-commitment than to anything else. This is so because after the initiation process, many students tend to

want to both enjoy whatever benefits may accrue from being associated with a given Sufi master while, simultaneously, keeping his or her distance from that teacher.

"Distance" in the foregoing is measured by the extent to which one is prepared to bind one's time and energy. The less of our personal resources of time and energy, or love and loyalty, we are willing to invest in our relationship with our teacher, the more spiritually distant we remain from the teacher, even though the teacher may be quite close to us spiritually.

The student gives expression to the quality of distance by making her or his relationship with the teacher a matter of convenience. More specifically, if that relationship fits into the student's current activities, interests and priorities, then the student may become involved, within limits, with the directives, indications and suggestions of the teacher.

The character and extent of the involvement, nonetheless, still will be determined by how such activity fits into a set of already existing priorities. The student will want to accommodate the Sufi relationship to one's current arrangements rather than organize the pattern's of one's life style around the relationship with the teacher.

To the degree the shaykh's teachings or instructions are perceived to be incompatible with, or problematic for, the student's various priorities of the moment, then the student will avoid or resist any spiritual requirements that bind one's time and energy in ways which conflict with such priorities. When push comes to shove, spiritual issues tend to get bumped down the line by other commitments and semi-commitments.

Many initiates try to keep their options open as long as they can. They want to be able to switch back and forth between spirituality and the world according to their shifting moods. They want their relationship with the shaykh to be based on semi-commitments.

The process of initiation, however, is, in essence, a declaration of commitment. The teacher is making a commitment to the student, and the student is making a commitment to the teacher.

In accepting an individual as a student, the teacher is committing himself or herself to serve the best spiritual interests of the initiate. Whatever help,

assistance, support, or guidance may be needed by a student in the post-initiation period, the teacher is placing herself or himself under a standing obligation to do whatever God permits to be done to honor those needs.

From the perspective of the one who is seeking to be initiated by a spiritual teacher, the would-be student is swearing fidelity to the shaykh as well as to the teachings and instructions of the shaykh. The one undergoing initiation is placing himself or herself under a duty of care concerning the integrity of one's attitudes toward, and interaction with, the teacher.

God will not permit the Sufi shaykh to forget the commitments made to the student at the time of initiation. The ego often will not permit the student to remember the commitments made to the shaykh at the time of initiation.

A major, if not the primary, prerequisite for making progress in the initial stages of the path revolves around this process of traveling from an orientation of semi-commitment to one of commitment. In fact, for the most part, the path will remain closed to the individual until this transition is made.

People are variable in the amount of time required to make this transition. Unfortunately, there are some individuals who never achieve this.

Irrespective of whether or not a person makes the aforementioned transition, a shaykh always will be a well-wisher of the student. The shaykh will continue to assist the initiate in whatever way he or she can. However, the student herself or himself has placed constraints on what can be done by the shaykh through the initiate's unwillingness to leave semi-commitment behind and embrace genuine, sincere commitment.

A shaykh will never force such a transition on the student. There are several reasons for this.

From the Sufi perspective, any change, transformation or transition in a student which does not sincerely emanate from the heart of an individual is relatively worthless. Such changes are not properly rooted and, therefore, are unlikely to last. There will be a tendency for the individual to revert to the condition of semi-commitment under the pressure of trials and difficulties.

Secondly, there are benefits to be gained by the student during the attempt to journey from the stage of semi-commitment to the stage of commitment. Although this transition will never occur without the presence of grace, nonetheless, spiritual strength is acquired from the efforts expended in the struggle.

Moreover, different kinds of experience are gained during the course of the struggle. Such experience often proves to be of value at other junctures of the path.

Consequently, if the shaykh were to force or impose commitment, the individual would lose out in a number of ways. There are many factors which must be taken into consideration by the shaykh in determining how, and to what extent, support and assistance should be given to an initiate.

The shaykh will not impose commitment on the individual. Nevertheless, the shaykh constitutes the means through which the initiate comes to recognize, if God wishes, the difference between commitment and semi-commitment.

One of the defining features of the life of a shaykh is commitment. Everything a Sufi master does radiates commitment. In time this dimension of the life of the shaykh may become very influential in shaping the perspective of the student.

The relationship between commitment and semi-commitment is not an all or none sort of thing for the initiate. They form a ratio which fluctuates with time.

Sometimes we are more ensconced in semi-commitments, rather than in commitment, to the teacher and the path. At other times the weight has swung more in the direction of commitment, although residues of semi-commitment may remain.

Spiritual progress is made when the ratio between the two acquires some degree of stability in favor of commitment over semi-commitment. An important spiritual stage is reached when semi-commitments disappear altogether.





## Chapter 59

### Devolution

Controlled evolution is the next stage of human progress, or so some people seem to suppose. According to this sort of perspective, exciting new developments are happening in more and more fields. This is generating a synergistic collusion of physics, genetics, biochemistry, medicine, economics, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

All these fields are playing-off one another, as well as converging, in complex, breathtakingly beautiful, new ways as they spin their golden threads at faster and faster rates. The discoveries and inventions emerging from the dynamics of this dialectic will be woven into the fabric out of which human destiny will be cut. Furthermore, we will be free to design whatever pattern we like.

This vision for the relatively near future is lent support by the unbelievable technical advances being made, virtually every day, through dazzling cascades of human ingenuity and creativity. Knowledge is said to be expanding as never before in human history.

Some claim the elimination of all disease and congenital disabilities is near at hand. The genetic re-engineering of the human being into the next phase of evolution seems to becoming less a conjecture of science fiction and more a function of technical feasibility.

The media lab of today supposedly is laying the foundations for the multifaceted, interactive, integrated knowledge labs of the future. We will be able to take control of our own educations throughout our lives.

Moreover, the world will be electronically wired in ways which will lead, or so the story goes, to greater and greater empowerment. Such technological empowerment will translate into enhanced freedom for all human beings.

The discordant counterpoint to the above rhapsodizing is the actual condition of the world. For the vast majority of people, the world is not a very pleasant, safe, healthy or empowering place in which to live.

Only an extremely small and exclusive proportion of the world's population controls and consumes most of the land and resources of Earth. The gap between rich and poor has evolved into an, apparently, unbridgeable canyon. Indeed, the distance separating the rich and the poor

is increasing at a rate rivaling, if not exceeding, the expansion of technical knowledge.

There does not exist in the world today either enough money or natural resources to allow the promises of a brave new world to be extended to the majority of people today. This trend only will be exacerbated as we move into tomorrow.

Arable land is disappearing along with the rain forests. Species -- both known and unknown -- are being eliminated every day, and the rate of extinction seems to be accelerating.

Non-renewable resources are being consumed, presently, at rates which probably will exhaust those resources toward the middle of the next century. Global economic competition is heating up in ways that merely advance our date of encounter with the critical point of exhaustion.

The technological expertise necessary to generate the relatively clean energy of fusion reactions on a commercial basis is not yet available. In fact, we don't seem to be close to the sorts of breakthrough in this area which would make fusion reactors practically realizable in the near future.

A number of other, relatively safe alternatives have been explored, to some extent, as potential sources of energy. However, for a variety of economic, commercial and technical reasons, none of these alternatives is currently considered a desirable way of meeting the large scale energy needs being projected for the future.

We are left with the problematic energy production of fission reactors. The challenge of dealing with spent fuel rods in a safe way has not, yet, been fully resolved. There are down sides to virtually every proposal for disposal.

Moreover, there is a very real risk of updated versions of the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl disasters on the horizon. This is especially so in the former Soviet Union, but one should not discount such a possibility in relation to nuclear facilities in other parts of the world.

More and more pressure is being placed on the world's various ecosystems. Water, land and air are under constant siege by a devilishly complex array of salvos from an endless variety of toxic substances. The

holes in the ozone layer are getting bigger. The food chain is being compromised from top to bottom.

Global warming has a whole set of potentially problematic, if not disastrous, ramifications for, among other things, weather patterns, food production, coastal ecologies, and quite a few cities and people. Despite the attempts of industry and producers of fossil fuels to avoid being fingered for substantial culpability in the observed trend in global warming, the evidence against them continues to accumulate.

Furthermore, everyone who earns a living off such enterprises or consumes their products deserves a proportionate share of responsibility for the problems of global warming and pollution generated by those industries. Few, if any of us, have clean hands on this issue, although some people may be more culpable than others.

The manufacture and distribution of weapons around the world is a growth industry. Its rate of growth is exceeded, perhaps, only by the enterprise of death which has spun off from the weapons industry.

People are being slaughtered in regional hostilities at unprecedented rates. The amount of carnage is, in no small measure, due to the contributions ensuing from technological advances in weaponry.

Whether through the effects of fierce global economic competition, or through the production of pollution as collateral damage resulting from such competition, or through the manufacture and distribution of weaponry, more and more of us, both directly as well as indirectly, are making a living off the death of others. We are finding newer and better ways to kill one another through our vaunted human ingenuity and creativity.

New emergent viruses are making their presence felt in increasing numbers. We have little, or no, way of treating these highly infectious and frequently fatal diseases.

In addition, we are in serious danger of losing many of the battles we thought we had won years ago with the introduction of a host of miracle drugs. New, deadly strains of antibiotic resistant diseases are showing up all over the world.

Modern governments and corporations often "solve" problems by creating other problems. Like sweeping dust from one location to another, there is the appearance of change, but the underlying situation, despite

the changes, still remains largely the same. The overall level of problems has not been reduced, and, all too frequently, is even increased.

World debt—national, corporate and individual, is increasing. Many cannot even look after the interest charges accruing from their debt, to say nothing of the principle involved.

Governments, currencies, communities, businesses, and individuals around the world are being buffeted about by the vagaries of the debt issue. Almost everybody has a theory, but there are no proven solutions.

In the mean time, government services are being cut. Businesses are being down-sized. Individuals and companies alike are declaring financial insolvency with startling frequency. Countries are threatening to default on their national debts.

Many people believe these events are not harbingers of the darkness just before the break of a better economic day. Instead, many believe these lean/mean times mark the beginning of the economic/business version of nuclear winter for millions, if not billions, of people.

Long-term, structural unemployment has become a fact of life in many countries. Real salaries for most people are decreasing.

Poverty is increasing. For many people, health-care is becoming less affordable. Hunger and homelessness are on the rise.

Many countries are falling apart. Numerous governments are in disarray. Infrastructure is degenerating. A flood of communities are decaying.

Far too many families are becoming dysfunctional. More and more individuals are becoming increasingly angry, frustrated, bewildered, confused, impatient and intolerant.

There is precious little in any of the foregoing which suggests empowerment for the overwhelming majority of people in the world. Various degrees of enslavement would seem to be more in keeping with the reality of things in the world. Indeed, most of the people of the world spend their lives empowering others to empower the few.

These days we hear a great deal about the information technologies and sciences. This information is being upgraded as we switch over to knowledge-based technologies.

Unfortunately, nowhere on the drawing boards does one find blueprints or specifications for a wisdom-based system. We are burying ourselves beneath our own technologically and scientifically produced information and knowledge, but we have not come up with the sort of wisdom circuit boards which would permit us to upgrade our systems so we can dig ourselves out from beneath our cleverness.

One does not have to be an expert in black holes to grasp the fact we all are being irrevocably drawn toward the event horizon of a man-made black hole of crushing proportions. The closer we come to the event horizon, the greater will be the distortions to which we shall be subjected and the fewer will be the degrees of freedom within which to maneuver.

Synergy is usually thought of in terms of a positive and constructive confluence of events. However, we should not overlook the negative and destructive possibilities which may result from a confluence of forces and events.

Contrary to the pronouncements of the champions of technologized modernity, we are not on the verge of a utopian millennium. Rather, we are on the precipice of an abyss of self-destruction. The evidence for this is pervasive and undeniable.

To talk of controlling our future evolution, seems ludicrous when we cannot even control our present selves. In fact, we are so far out of control, there is considerable question whether or not the downward spiral of devolution which is transpiring on all levels—from individual to ecological, has too much momentum to be reversed. If we have not yet passed beyond the point of no return, there are many who feel we have precious little time left in which to turn things around.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, the outward condition of the world is but a reflection of our inner, spiritual condition. There are problems in the life of the external world because there are problems in our spiritual lives. The two are functionally related.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi way, the difficulties of the outer world cannot be addressed until we have addressed the inner spiritual problems. We can spend all the money and energy we like, and we can pass all the legislation which seems appropriate, and we can use all of the science and technology which is available to us, and we can consult all the business, financial and economic models on which we can lay our

hands, and none of this, in whatever combination, will bring about the removal of the difficulties in question.

When our worldly problems continue to resist treatment, we often believe all we have to do is either: tinker about and attempt to improve existing methods of treatment; or, discover some new theoretical approach of the right sort. The masters of the Sufi path suggest that if we look at things in either of the above two manners, our efforts will bear few, if any, fruitful results.

Sufi masters point out the answers to our questions and problems have always been within each of us from the very beginning. The understanding of these answers depends on our activating and realizing the potential of our spiritual identities and capacities.

This process of spiritual understanding is a matter of unfolding or unveiling, not evolution—biological cultural or spiritual. The very first human beings to walk the Earth were as capable in this respect, and, perhaps, even more so, than their modern counterparts.

Collectively and individually, we are in the mess we are in, because, in general, we have permitted our intentional consciousness and understanding to undergo a process of devolution or degeneration. This has led us further and further away from our spiritual essence.

Our essential capacity and identity are, according to the Sufi masters, the only means through which, God willing, we may extricate ourselves from our current situation, both individually and collectively. Consequently, our hope lies not with learning how to control our evolution. Our hope and salvation rest with eliminating the forces which sustain and nurture the process of devolution currently undermining our spirituality, and, as a result, destroying us and the Earth.

## Chapter 60

### Haqiqah

Haqiqah is the Reality of all realities. Haqiqah is the Truth behind all truths.

Haqiqah is not a substance, thing, object, entity, material, field, force, or energy. Yet, Haqiqah is "woven" into the fabric of each of these.

Haqiqah does not occupy time or space, Rather, time and space exist by virtue of Haqiqah.

Haqiqah is neither a quantity nor a quality, while all quantities and qualities, receive their properties through Haqiqah.

Haqiqah is not a function of: ideas, concepts, thoughts, understandings, interpretations, or theories. However, all of these presuppose, and make allusions to, Haqiqah, each in its own way.

Haqiqah is not: religion, philosophy, science, or mythology. On the other hand, Haqiqah is sought by, and is the *raison d'être* of, all of these activities.

Haqiqah can neither be described nor explained. Nonetheless, descriptions and explanations, whether correct or incorrect, cannot exist except through Haqiqah.

The eyes, mind, imagination, heart and spirit all see Haqiqah according to their capacity to do so. But, Haqiqah transcends what is seen.

Consciousness, being, will, light, hearing, and speech – these all exist because of the presence of Haqiqah. Nevertheless, all of these bear witness to the absence of Haqiqah, each in its own way.

Every chord, song, melody, rhythm, counterpoint, harmony, chant, hymn, tune, aria and symphony is an echo of Haqiqah. Every drawing, painting, sketch, tracing, etching, spattering, composition, impression, collage and picture is an attempt, on one level or another, to capture Haqiqah.

Information, knowledge, understanding, insight, inspiration, gnosis, and revelation simultaneously disclose and conceal Haqiqah, each according to its nature. Everything reflects Haqiqah in terms of its capacity to do so, but Haqiqah is independent of all capacities.

Genius praises the intelligence of Haqiqah but cannot fathom the depths of wisdom. Talent soars on the wings provided by Haqiqah but cannot comprehend what makes flight possible.

Purpose and meaning have value only to the extent they give expression to the mystery which Haqiqah has placed within us. Significance derives its importance from what Haqiqah loans to it.

Haqiqah underwrites our being, but we remain heedless of the presence of Haqiqah. Our vision is made possible by Haqiqah, but most of us continue to be blind to the source of the light through which the visible becomes manifest.

We should will ourselves to seek Haqiqah. Yet, we suffer from complete paralysis without the restorative assistance of Haqiqah.

Haqiqah enables us to act. However, most of us act as if we were independent of Haqiqah.

We are able to speak due to Haqiqah. Unfortunately, most of us often use this gift to speak out against and distort Haqiqah.

We hear because of the mercy extended to us through Haqiqah. Nonetheless, many of us remain deaf to the call of Haqiqah.

We swim in an ocean of Haqiqah. Somehow, most of us manage to stay dry.

Haqiqah comes with every breath we take. But, many of us inhale the oxygen and reject Haqiqah.

Every second our hearts beat to the rhythm of Haqiqah. Nevertheless, most of us do not understand the significance of the sound.

Our consciousness is aware of itself, and we think this is quite amazing. However, most of us are unaware of Haqiqah, and, as a result, we trivialize the potential of consciousness.

Haqiqah bears witness to everything we do. Yet, many of us are not interested in reciprocating.

Haqiqah seeks us out of love, knowledge and generosity. Many of us seek to run away due to narcissism, ignorance and selfishness.

Haqiqah always treats us with justice. Many of us are intent on treating Haqiqah with injustice.

Haqiqah calls on us to forget falsehood and remember reality. Many of us call on ourselves to forget reality and remember falsehood.




Haqiqah gives expression to tidings of both hope and danger through prophets, saints and spiritual guides. Many of us ridicule both kinds of message.

When we deny Haqiqah, we deny our true selves. When we ignore Haqiqah, we ignore our essential spiritual capacities.

Some people say the culmination of mysticism involves union with God. However, one cannot attain what already is the case.

According to Sufi masters, one of the primary goals of the mystical path is the following. If God wishes, we should aspire to have the ignorance and darkness dispelled which prevent us from experiencing and reflecting the presence of Haqiqah in our lives and being.

Consequently, one of the fundamental accomplishments of the mystical path is to realize, as fully as God gives us the capacity to do so, that, in essence, we are nothing but a manifestation of Haqiqah. In order for this to occur, what needs to disappear is, if God wishes, the illusion that  other than this could be true.



## **Chapter 61**

### **Covenant**

Many people believe our covenant with God is forged exclusively in this world. From the Sufi perspective, this belief is not completely accurate.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, our covenant with God first took place prior to our coming into the present physical/material realm of being. What transpires in this world is about whether or not we will honor our original, pre-creational covenant.

Undergoing initiation into a given Sufi Order or taking exoteric religious vows is not a first-time contract between us and God. In a sense, these processes are re-creations of events which, as suggested above, already have occurred.

Initiation is an example of just one of the many things we must do in order to abide by, or to honor, the conditions of the pre-creational undertaking. Such activities both serve to confirm the original covenant as well as help us to work our way toward remembering what we have forgotten.

Sufi masters indicate the original agreement was somewhat like a challenge to our spirits. More specifically, prior to coming into this world, our spirits were asked, in effect, whether we always would recognize God.

Our spirits were asked whether we always would submit to God. Our spirits were asked whether we always would love and cherish God. Our spirits were asked whether we always would obey God.

Our spirits were asked whether we always would remember God. Our spirits were asked whether we always would worship and praise God. Our spirits were asked whether we always would be thankful to God.

According to Sufi masters, everyone who was brought into existence in this world answered: "Yes!", to all of the above. In fact, God only gave physical/material existence to those spirits who answered the challenge in an affirmative fashion.

However, when our spirits were brought into association with our bodies and placed in this world through birth, we became mesmerized by the intense effects of worldly existence on sensation, emotions, and

thinking. As a result we quickly forgot: who we are; or, from where we had come; or, to what we had agreed in our original covenant.

As outlined previously, when we become initiated or we take religious vows, supposedly, this constitutes a first step along the path to regaining our spiritual identities and memories. The deep and tragic irony of this step, however, is that no sooner do many of us confirm our original covenant through the process of initiation or the taking of vows, then we start to forget again as we continue to be dominated and preoccupied by the addictive impact of the world on our systems.

Many of us may be skeptical of the idea we have made a covenant with God prior to created existence which we, subsequently, have forgotten. Nevertheless, we should reflect on the fact that the very same thing happens all over again, before our very eyes, in the present world.

In each case, the story is the same. Our addictions to sensations, worldly gratification and the false self have led us to forget our true selves and our covenant with God.

One of the most fundamental struggles confronting our life in this world is to remember not only what we promised to God but to remember the act of promising itself. One of the most basic tasks we must fulfill in the life of this world is to honor our pre-creational covenant.

Like someone who has suffered a massive cerebral stroke, we must undergo a program of rehabilitation in order to regain our spiritual memories and faculties. We must seek out those, such as the Sufi masters, who specialize in the requisite therapeutic procedures.

Slowly, we must be brought to the point where we can recognize God in all things. We must be trained to overcome our spiritual aphasia, as well as to regain the use of our tongues so that, once again, we may praise God continuously.

We must be helped to reactivate our atrophied capacity to love and cherish God. We must be shown how to exercise our muscles so that we may have control over our locomotor system in order to be able to obey God in all things.

We must be given treatment which induces our amnesia to lift so that our remembrance of God may be clear and steady under all circumstances. Our faculties for eternal gratitude and submission to God must be re-educated. We must be given remedial programs which will

help bring us up to speed with respect to how we ought to worship God in an unceasing fashion.

We are not doing God any favors by seeking out, and entering into, these kinds of rehabilitation program. God, in fact, is doing us the favor by subsidizing such free clinics and staffing them with individuals who are not only skilled, knowledgeable experts, but who are individuals possessing, by the grace of God, tremendous compassion, patience and love. They have unbelievable bedside manners.

In any event, entering into spiritual rehabilitation programs of the foregoing sort is a matter of personal integrity. We made a covenant with God. We made promises to God. The issue is straightforward: will we honor our word?

God challenged us prior to our coming into material existence. We accepted that challenge. We were given physical existence.

Now, we are being asked by God to put our money, so to speak, where our mouth is. Were we bluffing or were we sincere when we made the original covenant with God? Time will tell.



## Chapter 62

### Mithal

The world of symbols and similitudes (al-mithal) is a realm with which most of us have had some contact. When we dream, we travel to this world.

The language of dreams is expressed through symbols and similitudes which are drawn from this realm. Consequently, there is a need for interpreting the significance or meaning of dreams.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, there can be no standard reference book of dreams. In other words, a given symbol or similitude can mean something quite different to different people under the same or different circumstances. In fact, one and the same symbol or similitude may mean something very different to the same individual at various stages of the spiritual journey.

For example, light, as a symbol, may refer to guidance or it could be a reference, of some sort, to the angelic realm. It could refer to mental processes or to the condition of the heart.

Light might refer to hope or aspiration. It also could be a similitude which reflects a quality or dimension of some condition, object or person.

One's own spirit or the spirit of someone else could be alluded to through light. Alternatively, it might serve as an harbinger in relation to some aspect of the future.

The realm of Divine Names and Attributes could be signified by the symbol of light. On the other hand, it might be a similitude for some sort of illusory or distorting influence.

Light might be a warning of some kind. It also might be an indication of spiritual progress.

Any one of a number of planes or realms of existence could be signified through light. Light also might refer to one's degree of purity or sincerity.

The possible meanings and significance surrounding light as a symbol or similitude could be continued indefinitely beyond the few possibilities suggested in the foregoing.

Moreover, light is just one of an infinite number of possible symbols or similitudes which exists in the world of al-mithal. Each of these

possibilities, like light, encompasses many kinds of meanings and significances.

When a person dreams, the meaning of the symbols and similitudes given expression in the dream depend on many factors. The spiritual condition of the individual is one, obviously important factor. However, the needs, desires, problems, and circumstances of the individual also are important considerations.

There is a dialectical interaction between the individual and the symbols and similitudes of the world of al-mithal. How the two fit together is not always straightforward.

According to Sufi masters, the ability to interpret dreams is a spiritual gift. It is not an intellectual exercise.

Prophet Joseph (peace be upon him) did not go to a handy reference book of dreams in the prison library and proceed to mentally work out the meaning of the dreams of his fellow prisoners. The significance of the dreams came through spiritual unveiling and inspiration.

One of the ways in which a spiritual guide may help the initiate is through interpreting the dreams of the seeker. Initially, this assistance may come in helping the initiate to differentiate between dreams which are primarily about the world, and those dreams which are, in some fashion, spiritually significant.

When a person starts to make some degree of progress in the early stages of the path, one of the first places this may show up is in dream form. The character of the individual's dreams may undergo a transition away from worldly and ego preoccupations and toward spiritual issues.

During certain subsequent stages of the path, the individual may dream very little in a way that can be remembered. Instead, spiritual experiences, which previously had been restricted to dreams, may begin to occur during the waking state.

The world of symbols and similitudes is not just about dreams. As indicated in the foregoing paragraph, one can have non-ordinary, waking experiences whose form is shaped, colored and oriented by this realm of symbols and similitudes.

Sufi masters indicate the initiate's situation becomes somewhat precarious when these sorts of experiences begin to happen. The source



of this potential danger arises from the fact that a number of different forces are operating in the world of al-mithal.

In addition to spiritual forces, there are also satanic forces which are present in this realm. In addition, one's own ego can influence what symbols or similitudes come into play.

Consequently, although there is a potential for guidance and spiritual benefit being derived from one's encounters with the realm of al-mithal, there also are numerous opportunities for the individual to become exposed to, and influenced by, various sources of misguidance, distortion and falsehood in that world. Furthermore, as is the case with dreams, no matter what happens in the world of al-mithal, those experiences require interpretation in order for the individual to be able to understand the significance and meaning of the symbols and similitudes which occur in various non-ordinary experiences.

Once again, the spiritual guide can provide both assistance and protection for the initiate with respect to interpreting such experiences. Indeed, if God wishes, by means of the spiritual wisdom and insight which come through the spiritual guide, the initiate is enabled to navigate through the potentially treacherous waters of the individual's experiential encounters with the world of al-mithal.

Unfortunately, some initiates believe they are independent of the spiritual guide's protection and assistance. As a result, they proceed to put their own interpretations on their non-ordinary experiences.

This may happen in any number of ways. For instance, the initiate may not tell the spiritual guide about certain experiences and, then, proceed to place his or her own interpretations onto these experiences. On the other hand, the initiate may tell the shaykh about such experiences but not accept the teacher's guidance in relation to them.

Both of these actions are serious breaches of spiritual etiquette on the Sufi path. Moreover, almost invariably, the initiate encounters spiritual problems as a result of her or his mistakes concerning the experiences in question.

If one is fortunate, the mistakes and problems can be remedied. If one is unfortunate, one may fall away from the spiritual path, either temporarily or permanently.

Although the dangers associated with the world of al-mithal should not be minimized, this realm also may be a source of many blessings. Among other things, the individual may be brought into contact with the spirits of Prophets, saints and other spiritual luminaries. There is much which can be gained and learned through these encounters.

The world of al-mithal is vast, subtle, and rich in possibilities. One easily could become caught up in its intricacies and complexities.

However, Sufi masters warn against this temptation. There are many more worlds or realms which must be traversed on one's journey to God.

Sufi masters recommend one learn only what is necessary at each stage and, then proceed on to the next stage. Necessity is defined as that which will help one fulfill the purpose of life— namely, to realize one's true identity and essential capacity in order to be able to worship, serve and love God to the extent of our potential to do so.

## **Chapter 63**

### **Faith**

From the perspective of Sufi masters, faith means something very different from what many people understand by that word. For practitioners of the Sufi path, faith is alive, dynamic, growing, rich, transformative, subtle, deep, wise, aware, and penetrating.

If, however, one were to ask people to characterize the notion of faith, many of these individuals probably would come up with something along the following lines. Faith is a strong belief or opinion about the correctness of something. Such people, or, at least, some of them, might characterize faith as blind, dogmatic, antiquated, closed, infantile, static, primitive and irrational.

For many people, issues of faith conjure up images of superstition, myths, and magical thinking. As such, faith becomes something one resorts to when certain things happen in one's life, much as someone might knock on wood or throw salt over one's shoulder under certain circumstances.

Other individuals consider faith to be something which, like myths, may bring meaning, order and purpose to a person's life but has little to do with reality. Such people also might contend faith is like the magical thinking which takes place at certain stages of childhood. In magical thinking there is a sense one merely has to imagine something in order for this act of imagination to induce reality to conform to the character of what has been imagined.

Many people consider faith to be, for the most part, relatively harmless, perhaps even beneficial. Faith is something that gets one through the day.

Different people rely on various things to see them through the difficulties of day-to-day life. For some people, faith is the boat in which one rides out the inclement weather and storms of life.

On the other hand, faith also has the capacity to be a very dangerous commodity in the wrong hands. Millions of people have been impaled on the faith of the true believers across history. Issues of faith have torn apart families, communities and countries.

In point of fact, faith of one kind or another plays a central role in the lives of everyone. This faith may not be spiritual in nature, but it is a species of faith.

Faith is a relationship between, on the one hand, what is known or understood in the present, and, on the other hand, how what is known now will carry into, and unfold within, the unknown future. Faith is the projective map which links our past experience to the future and links the known to the unknown. Faith is the way we orient ourselves in the present on the basis of past experience in order to be able to engage whatever transpires in the future with a sense of commitment and purpose.

Even in a mundane, non-spiritual context, faith is more than just a belief. There is an intensity of conviction in faith which is not necessarily present in belief.

In the case of faith, of whatever species, there is a readiness to act on the basis of that in which one has faith. On the other hand, one may have many beliefs on which one is not prepared to act.

On the basis of past experience, one may have faith in one's family or one's country. One is convinced one can rely on them in a variety of ways. One is sure they will respond in the future as they have responded in the past.

Consequently, one goes about one's present life with an orientation rooted in one's understanding of these aspects of past experience. One is prepared to engage the future on the basis of this understanding.

Sometimes, our family or country breaks faith with us. A spouse engages in adultery. A child gets into trouble with the law. A country engages in certain brutal domestic or foreign policies which one never thought would have been possible.

One's faith has been undermined. One no longer knows how to look to the future. One no longer knows how to orient oneself in order to prepare for engaging life as it plunges into the unknown.

On the basis of past experiences, one has developed relationships of faith with many dimensions of one's day to day life. Indeed, one's whole life is shaped, colored and directed by a spectrum of faith relationships.

Neighbors, friends, acquaintances, doctors, business associates, teachers, community leaders, scientists, newspaper columnists, television personalities, athletes, store employees, and so on, all interact to form a complex web of faith relationships in our lives. We establish a range of strong and weak faith links to different parts of our world.

There is much we do not know about even those with whom we interact on a consistent and intimate or close basis. There is even more we do not know about many of the other people who touch our lives in one way or another.

Nonetheless, on the basis of whatever direct and indirect experience we have, we trust some people, and we do not trust others. We have faith in some people, and we do not have faith in others.

Whether our judgments about people are correct or accurate is not at issue here. As a result of whatever evaluation of, or critical reflection of, our experience with others that takes place, we spin our threads of faith which attach us, however strongly or tenuously, to those around us.

Those threads will be broken or reinforced or will barely be attached depending on what happens in the future. The winds of change will affect the web of faith one has spun.

A neighbor is indicted for embezzlement. A teacher is accused of sexual improprieties with a student. An unsavory person saves someone's life. A leader resigns under a cloud of scandal. A manager decides to deal more humanely with employees. A friend is fired for incompetence or dereliction of duty. One's spouse wants to give the marriage a more committed effort. A religious leader checks into a substance abuse facility. An enemy asks for one's forgiveness. An athlete is accused of shaving points. An acquaintance one hardly knows shows incredible kindness in a time of need. A scientist fudged data in a series of experiments.

We shape our lives on the basis of the opinions, beliefs, conclusions, assessments and judgments we make concerning the events of our day. We vote for people, avoid people, gossip about people, abuse people, condemn people, make friends with people, marry people, divorce people, value people, and marginalize people all on the basis of the

character of the faith which is generated by our reflections on impressions derived from our experience, direct or indirect, with others.

Even the lives of scientists and physicians are shaped by many elements of faith. A doctor, for example, has faith in her or his abilities as, say, a surgeon despite the fact there may have been questionable judgment calls or mistakes in the past.

A scientist has faith in the work of other scientists and relies on that work to inform and frame his or her own research. A scientist does not have time to replicate every experiment performed. They have faith other researchers are reporting on their work in a forthright, honest manner. Yet, there have been more than a few scandals, both historically as well as in the present, in which scientists, both famous and unknown, knowingly have put forth spurious research material.

A scientist has faith in the equipment used to make measurements or to detect the occurrence of certain phenomena. However, the scientist may have only limited knowledge of how the equipment actually produces its results. Instead, they may be relying on what technicians or company representatives or other scientists are telling them about the reliability of such equipment.

A scientist or medical practitioner may have faith in the methodology of science and research because of the many valuable results which are produced by following that method. However, just as using the method has led to many blind alleys in the past, there is no guarantee one will obtain important results in the future.

Not every scientist wins a Nobel Prize or makes important contributions to the advancement of understanding. A lot of research is neither here nor there as far as value is concerned.

Moreover, there are many areas, such as morality, mysticism, religion and creativity, which seem to be totally impervious to the quantitative techniques and methods of science. In addition, many non-linear phenomena can only be roughly approximated, if at all, by scientific methods. Yet, most of life involves non-linear systems.

Nevertheless, one goes with that in which one has faith. As long as the quantity and quality of positive experiences exceeds the quantity and quality of negative experiences, one will tend to keep faith with various judgments one has made on the basis of experience.

Throughout the foregoing, there have been persistent themes of experience, change, growth, learning, judgment, reflection, critical assessment, and dynamics juxtaposed to the issue of faith. Faith, even in a mundane sense, has been shown to have potential for subtlety, complexity, nuances and richness. Faith is something which is very much alive for most of us and central to the way we engage life.

Sufi masters maintain that faith in a mystical context is quite consonant, in its own manner, with all of the foregoing. Spirituality is rooted in, and permeated by experience and our understanding of that experience.

We have a relationship with God. God is interacting with us all the time through a variety of experiential channels both within us, as well as outside of us.

We have dreams or mystical experiences or enter into certain spiritual conditions and states. We have interaction with our spiritual guide. We read sacred texts, or we learn about the lives of great mystics of the past.

We talk to other people, both within and outside of, the path. We try various kinds of practices and see what effects or results ensue.

We attempt to live in accordance with the spiritual teachings of the path and take note of the problems and benefits which may arise. We reflect on the experience of other people whom we know and whom we have come to trust.

Our life is like a scatter diagram of experiences. Consequently, we try to generate the hermeneutical equivalent to a regression line in statistics. We attempt to plot a life line which comes closest to representing the central trends of our scattered experiences.





## **Chapter 64**

### **Aspiration**

There are three general categories of aspiration within us. Normally, only one of these is spiritual in character, and this spiritual aspiration is opposed by, and in conflict with, expressions of the other two categories—namely, passion and anger.

The Sufi path involves three broad sets of transformation with respect to aspirations. One set of transformations entails reforming passion and anger so they become spiritual allies instead of liabilities. The other two sets of transformations consist of the purification and perfection of spiritual aspiration, especially in relation to the nature of the modalities or spiritual instruments through which we engage our relationship with God.

All three sets of transformations involve changes in the character of the "object" toward which aspiration is directed. In addition, a transition in the degree of intensity of aspiration occurs in all three transformational sets. More specifically, this change in intensity revolves around the process of becoming less dispersed, and more 'gathered', in our intentions, awareness, understanding and behavior.

Although human beings are born with all three categories of aspiration, very shortly after birth, for most of us, passion and anger begin to dominate our lives, while spiritual aspiration is marginalized and relegated to the background. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but, generally speaking, the unfolding of spirituality, to the extent it occurs at all, lags significantly behind the unfolding of passion and anger.

Passion encompasses all those tendencies within us which seek to acquire. These acquisitive predispositions are directed toward procuring more and more: material possessions, power, money, fame, status, and physical gratifications of one description or another.

Anger includes all the inclinations within each of us which are directed toward defending the passions against anything constituting a threat to past, present or future acquisitions. Hostility, antagonism, malice, conflict and rebellion are all expressions of anger in action. If one looks carefully at the situations in which these different modalities of anger arise, one will detect the existence of one or more vested interests of passion at the heart of the issue.

By dominating consciousness, intentions, motivations, thinking, attitudes, evaluations, judgments and behavior, the activities of anger and passion create the illusion of a self which is being served by such activity. In other words, our awareness is mesmerized, or a state of hypnosis is induced in consciousness, by the activities of anger and passion. As a result, awareness identifies with them as being possessions of, and acting on behalf of, consciousness.

Over time, a history of experiences, decisions and behaviors is generated. Memories are recorded and used by passion and anger to serve their respective agendas.

This entire ensemble of passion, anger, mesmerized awareness and remembered life history are the primary forces which underwrite the existence of the false self or ego. All aspirations which arise in the context of this ensemble are seen as aspirations of the illusory self.

This "self" has no substantive reality per se. In other words, this self had no existence prior to its invention or construction.

The false self or ego is merely an arrangement of convenience and circumstance. It is an artificial business arrangement which has been organized by our various modalities of passion and anger for purposes of carrying on different kinds of commercial transactions with the world.

Our God-given capacity for choice is usurped by the false-self conglomerate. Due to the state of hypnotic trance of ordinary consciousness, the process of exercising free will, within our capacity to do so, is arrogated to the false self through the manipulations, seductions and pressure tactics of passion and anger.

Judgments, decisions, and choices begin to get locked into interacting patterns of habit. These patterns reflect, and conform to, the collective dynamics of the various components of the false self or ego.

Exoteric values, practices and rituals have two important tasks to perform with respect to the ego conglomerate which has arisen. On the one hand, exoteric teachings try to help the individual close the gap between spiritual aspirations, which, for the most part, have lagged behind in development, and the dominant influence enjoyed by the aspirations of passion and anger in our day-to-day lives. On the other hand, exoteric teachings try to help the individual bring passion and anger into an acceptable spiritual balance.

The excesses and extremes of passion and anger must be constrained. A middle way of moderation must be discovered which will prevent the individual from transgressing beyond certain boundaries of spiritual propriety. Acquisitiveness and its protector must be trained to pursue their activities within Divinely sanctioned parameters of permissibility.

Exoteric teachings seek to strengthen the dimension of spiritual aspiration within the individual. At the same time, these teachings provide a framework of moderation which is intended to constrain passion and anger provided the framework is implemented by our developing spiritual aspiration.

If our spiritual aspiration becomes sufficiently mature, then, God willing, it begins to influence our capacity for choice. Over time, if everything goes well, we begin to discontinue some of the more injurious patterns of behavior generated through our aspirations of passion and anger.

The Sufi path is not content to merely constrain passion and anger. It seeks to transform them.

One of the themes of such transformation is to induce (through Sufi discipline, practices and so on) the individual to change the character of the object which is the focus of passion and anger. Instead of using anger and passion to seek the world, these two modalities of aspiration should be used to seek Divinity.

However, in order to have a chance of succeeding in achieving this transition in focus from worldly objects to Divinity, passion and anger cannot remain as they are. The intention underlying them must change, and, as well, passion and anger must come under the sphere of influence of all the qualities of spiritual etiquette.

Intention must become a servant of God. Everything which is done must be done for the love of God. Intention must be purified so nothing remains but the aspiration to please God.

The heart must be trained to collaborate with, and give expression to, spiritual aspiration. The heart's association with the aspirations of the false self or ego must be discontinued.

When, God willing, intentionality and the heart have been purified, then, by the grace of God, qualities of spiritual etiquette such as

patience, perseverance, forbearance, compassion, and forgiveness come to ascendancy. These qualities have, God willing, a transformative effect on passion and anger, and, as a result, passion and anger come to serve spiritual purposes.

Under these circumstances, the only aspiration of passion is to seek, know, love and serve God.

Furthermore, the aspiration of anger becomes a tendency to protect this spiritual passion from, and defend against, anything which would undermine or corrupt it.

If God wishes, in later stages of the maturation of spiritual aspiration, different capacities within that potential become experientially active. Although the focus of those experiences always remains God, the structural character, so to speak, of that focus undergoes various transformations.

Sufi masters speak of some of these transformations in terms of gnosis, witnessing, and love. In each case the experience of Divinity changes. Each kind of experiencing involves its own mode of spiritual etiquette.

On all levels, God responds to us in accordance with the character of our spiritual aspiration. When spiritual aspiration is at low ebb, God's way of relating to us will reflect the character of that kind of aspiration. As the quality and intensity of spiritual aspiration undergoes various developmental transformations, so too, does God's way of responding to us reflect those spiritual transitions.

In reality, God does not change, from beginning to end, during the journey of development or unfolding of spiritual aspiration. The nature of Divinity always is what Divinity is.

However, as spiritual aspiration goes through various transformations, our essential capacity becomes sensitive and receptive to the modalities of experiencing and realizing Divinity which are consonant with the condition of our aspiration. Consequently, the way God responds to us is merely a reflection of the way we relate to Divinity.

## Chapter 65

### Curriculum

Many people believe mysticism is just a lot of pie in the sky, cloaked in bizarre rituals. These same people tend to maintain mysticism is highly subjective, with little practical relevance to the real world. In addition, there is a strong suspicion among such people that spiritual guides are flimflam artists who either want your money or wish to enslave you, or both.

Mystical teachings are considered by many people to be come-ons which are vague and confused, promising fantastic powers but delivering little, if anything, which is substantial and tangible. Moreover, many people operate under the assumption there is really no difference between mysticism and either magic or the occult.

Generally speaking, people who hold the foregoing kinds of view have never met, or spent time with, a genuine mystical guide. Most, if not all, of their ideas on the matter are opinions based on received doctrine from someone else who, also, is essentially ignorant about things mystical.

They may have come in contact with individuals who claimed to be authentic mystical teachers but who -- in reality -- were not genuine. However, just as there is a difference between a counterfeit article and that which is being counterfeited, so too, there is fundamental set of differences between, on the one hand, true mystical teachers and teachings, and, on the other hand, pseudo mystical teachers and teachings.

As is the case with all other subjects, there are people who know what they are talking about when it comes to mysticism, and there also are people who do not know what they are talking about but try to sound as if they do have such knowledge. If the audience being addressed on such matters is ignorant of the truth, a false teacher can appear to be as impressive as a true teacher.

The problem faced by the average individual who is interested in mysticism is the following: trying to figure out how to differentiate between genuine tender and its counterfeit. A little gift of the gab, along with a modicum of charismatic showpersonship, plus a dash of chutzpah, can dazzle a lot of people into confusion and error.

Mysticism has absolutely nothing to do with the occult or magic. There may be dimensions of reality which do give expression to magical and

occult phenomena, but the mystical path is independent of, and entirely transcendent to, such phenomena.

Mysticism is not about pie in the sky. Mysticism is about the nature of the reality of our essential capacity and identity.

Mysticism is not impractical. It gives expression to eminently useful principles and practices which help us resolve and deal with the problems of day-to-day life.

Mystical teachers are not flimflam artists who have an abiding interest in money and control of other people's lives. Genuine mystical teachers are artists of truth and love who are unfailingly dedicated to compassion and helping people to realize their full capacity as human beings.

Mystical teachings are not a collection of rambling, obscure and vague pronouncements. True mystical teachings are very specific, often in-your-face, challenges to, and confrontations of, the false self.

Mysticism does not give expression to the ruminations of fanatical subjectivity. Authentic mysticism is the exact opposite of subjectivity.

The more subjective one is, the further from the truth one is. One of the objects of the mystical path is to induce us to give up the subjectivities which govern and ruin our lives.

The promises of the mystical path are rather substantial and concrete. We will have to struggle and persevere. We will have to exercise patience and do justice. We will have to sacrifice our egos.

We will have to accept difficulty and hardship with equanimity. We will have to learn how to swim in a sea of incredibly strong undertows of confusion and doubts.

We will have to generate not just feelings of compassion for others we will have to strive to actively and tangibly show compassion for others. We will have exercise sincerity in all we do. We will have to undergo the greater pain and trauma of the death of the false self before we endure the pain and trauma of the lesser death of the physical body.

If, by the grace of God, we are able to accomplish all of the foregoing, then, if God wishes, we will attain the peace, joy, freedom, understanding and love that come with the realization of our essential capacities and our true identities. Sufi masters have themselves experienced all of this, and

their lives give a running testimony to the truth of what has been promised, both with respect to the struggles and difficulties, as well as in relation to the possible fruits of one's endeavors.

A curriculum is sometimes described as the means or method used to bring an educational goal to completion. The curriculum of the Sufi path involves a no-nonsense, rigorous discipline which has a beginning, middle, and an end.

The goal of the mystical path is to know, love, worship and serve God in an unceasing, intense and direct manner. In order to have a chance of realizing this goal, a variety of subjects and methodologies must be experientially engaged, ingested and implemented in the fabric of one's life.

One must study the psychology of the false self. One must be trained in the requirements and nuances of spiritual etiquette which are capable of not only combating the false self but also are able to give expression to spiritual qualities of purity and harmony which supplant the machinations of the false self.

One must learn the nature and significance of objectivity. In conjunction with this, one must become well versed in the sources of spiritual distortion, bias and error.

One must come to understand the parameters and possibilities inherent in different spiritual instruments and modalities within us. In addition, one must learn how to calibrate these instruments and modalities so they give reliable, useful experiential results.

One must be helped to gain facility with a variety of practices and techniques such as chanting, meditation and contemplation. The how, when, why, and what of these practices involve a variety of principles and cautions which are not always easily acquired or implemented.

One needs to develop a taste for, appreciation of, and insight into, the meaning of the events and experiences which one encounters along the Sufi path. The scope of human potential is immense, and learning how to sort out the numerous forces (both problematic as well as beneficial) which act on us and through us, is a very complex issue.

One must learn how to bring balance, harmony and justice into all dimensions of one's life and one's interactions with the rest of creation. The middle way is the golden mean to a properly ordered life in each of

these respects. However, coming to understand exactly what this involves in any given instance, requires much practice and struggle.

All of the foregoing areas of investigation are part of the Sufi curriculum. They each have important contributions to make in assisting the individual toward the realization of the goal of the Sufi path.

Anyone who, God willing, sincerely pursues the mystical curriculum under the guidance of a genuine guide, will come to experience, first hand, that mysticism, in general, and the Sufi path in particular, are very, very different from what most people suppose to be the case. Such people will come to know mysticism is not an incoherent, subjective, impractical, occult-like set of speculations and theories which are incapable of satisfying the promise of self-realization and direct experience of Divinity.

This regression line is our link of faith with our experiences. The slope of the regression line is a ratio of what has been experienced to our assessment of that experience.

We extrapolate and interpolate with respect to the future on the basis of that regression line's slope. As new experiences and assessments are added, we stay with, or plot a new, regression line.

According to Sufi masters, the more one experiences the states, stations, tastes, expansions, contractions and so on of the path, the deeper, richer and stronger will one's faith become. There is nothing blind, dogmatic, closed, irrational, or static about this process.

As one learns, grows, develops, changes, and matures on the path, the structural character of one's faith undergoes growth, maturation, development and so on. This transformation of faith is a function of one's own direct experiences and the teacher's guidance in helping one to come to an understanding of the significance, value and meaning of such experience.

As is the case with all mundane species of everyday faith, so, too, mystical faith weds together knowns and unknowns. On the basis of what is known or understood, one develops a commitment to certain dimensions of what is unknown and unseen.

As faith develops, the horizons of the unknown may be pushed back to varying degrees. However, the horizon symbolizes the inexhaustible



nature of existence and our relationship with God. No matter how much we advance toward the horizon, the horizon always recedes into the distance.

God willing, we increase in spiritual understanding, insight, wisdom and knowledge, but there will always be unknowns which modulate our interactions with Divinity. Nonetheless, we continue to use what we know as the basis of our orientation toward what is unknown.

When we have faith in God, we rely on God to be our trustee in all affairs. As we acquire enhanced degrees of faith, our faith is transformed, God willing, into a sense of certainty that God will never abuse our faith or trust. This certitude is based on reflective experience and not on blind, unthinking, dogmatic belief and opinion. Unfortunately, a lot of people confuse being convinced of something with being certain in the mystical sense. Mystical certitude is a function of direct demonstration and experiential evidence of a sort that brooks no doubt as to its authenticity and truth. The experiences are overwhelming and incontrovertible in nature, and, more importantly, they are corroborated in independent ways by other people and other experiences.

To be convinced of something, however, merely means one has a strong opinion. Furthermore, this strong opinion is often held in the absence of any direct experiential demonstration.

In addition, such an opinion of conviction often is rooted in an interpretation of experiences which leaves room open for considerable doubt. An individual might acknowledge the legitimacy of such doubt under these circumstances if the person meditated on the matter very much or with any degree of rigor, care and consideration.

However, all too frequently, people of strong convictions, whether spiritual or non-spiritual in character, are uninterested in entertaining any doubts concerning their firmly entrenched beliefs. On the other hand, with practitioners of the Sufi path, the examination and exploration of doubt can lead to some very beneficial insights and understandings. One is encouraged to work with doubt, not to deny and repress it.



## Chapter 66

### Baqa

Deep within us there is a longing for permanence and stability. We dream of a place or condition in which we can feel completely at rest in some fundamental way.

In our heart of hearts we fervently hope that an abiding, essential sense of peace and security will somehow come into our lives and embrace us. We scan the horizons within us and around us for some trace of the very archetype, as it were, in which the idea of home, in the best sense of the term, is rooted.

This deep sense of: longing, or dreaming, or hoping shadows us for much, if not all, of our lives. It is pervasive and persistent, and, yet, seems like a will-o'-the-wisp which cannot be pinned down in any concrete, determinate manner.

We have a feeling we might be able to recognize the object of this longing if we ever were to come face to face with it. However, in the meantime, the longing just manifests itself as: an ineffable emptiness waiting to be filled; or, as an amorphous cosmic alienation waiting to be dissipated.

Many of the activities we pursue throughout our lives are actually attempts to satisfy the aforementioned longing. We entertain a wide variety of candidates during the course of our existence on Earth.

We seek to derive experiences of essential belonging in different organizations, groups, political parties, institutions and communities. We try to resolve the longing through relationships, marriage, sexual intimacy and families. We look to careers to fill the emptiness which haunts our waking hours.

Sooner or later, most of us discover that none of the foregoing -- whether individually or in combination -- are capable of satisfying our longing. As a result, many of us pursue activities which will either anesthetize the pain or distract us from such pain.

Thus, some of us drink to excess and take drugs. Some of us become promiscuous. Some of us take up hobbies. Some of become sports fanatics.

Some of us gamble. Some of us go shopping. Some of us become inveterate party-goers or fitness buffs. Some of us bury ourselves in our work and so on.

Sometimes we plunge into these sorts of activity as a kind of distant consolation. In other words, they don't necessarily quench the longing inside, but we find them enjoyable and, perhaps, even satisfying in certain ways.

Many of us, for the most part, have given up on ever finding a way to resolve our essential longing. Therefore, we try to find whatever small consolations in life we can and let it go at that.

In addition, due to our lack of success in locating the key or keys that will unravel the puzzle of unrequited longing, many of us gravitate toward bitterness, frustration, and disillusionment. As a result, we become prone to depression and cynicism.

Furthermore, since many of us are ill at ease with ourselves due to our feelings of alienation from things in general, as a result of our inability to experience a sense of being at home within ourselves and within the universe, many of us become easily annoyed with other people. Consequently, we tend to become involved in endless rounds of bickering, conflict and disputations.

Most of us may not even have any inkling why we do these things. They kind of just happen. We have plenty of rationalizations but no real answers.

In fleeting moments of reflection, we may feel the reverberations of the longing. However dimly we understand its significance, we often sense that satisfying that hunger is the key to many of our problems.

Yet, the solution to our dilemma remains as elusive as ever. Time moves on. The reverie evaporates before our eyes.

We long for stability and permanence, but we are inundated by transience and instability. Whatever happiness we find, it does not last. Whatever joy we find, it comes to an end. Whatever peace we stumble onto is but a brief reprieve in the eye of life's storms.

Like a roller coaster, our lives creep ever so slowly up the track to that first peak. Childhood and adolescence seem to last forever. Suddenly, our stomachs slam into our throats, and the descent of our lives takes us careening down the track through a few twists and turns to the end of the line.

We cannot get off. We cannot stop it. We only get one ride.

Desperately, we try to make sense of the ride. However, this is very difficult to do because everything is changing so quickly. Moreover, almost all of our attention and energies are spent screaming and trying not to regurgitate our lunch.

The Sufi masters indicate that essential permanence (baqa) can be realized, if God wishes, under certain circumstances or conditions. The Sufi path gives expression to these circumstances and conditions.

To find permanence and stability in the midst of fluctuation, one must permit God, through the exercise of one's free will, to remove everything except the will of God from one's soul, heart and essential being.

God alone is permanent. Consequently, everything which veils the presence of such permanence must be dissolved.

The guidance of the Sufi masters, the practices, the moral training, the struggle, the litanies, and so on are all supports provided by God to assist the individual to work toward permanence. Permanence is realized when the true self is, and the false self is not.

Only the true self is capable of giving expression to the will of God in an undistorted fashion. Only the true self is capable of participating in the quality of permanence. Only the true self has the capacity for essential and complete servitude before God. Only the perfect servant is able to reflect the will of God as God wishes it to be reflected through such a capacity.

God desires permanence for us. This is so because through permanence human capacity realizes its purpose and potential as an expression of God's will.

The reality of permanence cannot be described. It can only be experienced. Nonetheless, the experience of permanence colors, directs, shapes, informs and orients everything which the individual thinks, says, feels, does and is. This is what is entailed by those whom abide in God's permanence and, as a result, journey with, and by, Divinity.



## Chapter 67

### Ruh

The spirit (ruh) comes by the command of God. As a general rule, most people have very little direct, experiential knowledge of it.

The spirit is said to be the locus of manifestation of love. Indeed, the proper vocation of the spirit is nothing but love.

According to Sufi masters, there is a dimension of the heart which gives expression to love. However, this facet of the heart, when it becomes spiritually active, is consumed with love of human beings, specifically, and all of creation, in general.

There is another level of the heart which gives expression to love for the Divine Presence. The love of the spirit is complementary and supplemental to this kind of love of Divinity.

The spirit is dedicated completely to love of God. However, the spirit's capacity for Divine love, when it becomes perfected, illumines, shapes, colors and moves the love of the heart.

The spirit is described by Sufi masters as having certain qualities. These qualities are: familiarity, forbearance, light, love, life, knowledge and permanence.

The familiarity of the spirit is primordial in character. It is shaped by the experience of "being brought" by God from nonexistence into created existence. Furthermore, this aspect of familiarity reverberates with the original covenant of commitment between the spirit and God.

The spirit's quality of forbearance addresses, among other things, the spirit's capacity to refrain from everything except fulfilling the conditions of servanthood. Three spiritual currents run through this quality of forbearance: namely, modesty, tranquility and dignity.

Being modest in all things before God is one of the characteristics of a true servant. Moreover, through servanthood, one derives both essential dignity and tranquility.

A third quality of the spirit involves light. This potential encompasses hearing, speech and vision.

The servant of God hears the call of Divinity and responds in order to serve the will of God. Through speech, the servant of God also is busy with

praise, glorification and worship of Divinity. By means of vision, the servant experiences the overwhelming beauty and majesty of Divinity.

Love is another quality of the spirit. The love of the spirit is marked by yearning, seeking and sincerity.

The one in love always yearns for the beloved and is never happy away from the beloved. Restlessness characterizes the one who is separated from the source of all happiness, joy and unity.

Our restlessness in this world is a reflection of the spirit's yearning to be reunited with the beloved. No matter what we do or try, until we are wholly with the Beloved, we always will remain restless.

The one in love constantly is seeking the "object" of love. The individual sees traces and signs of that which is sought after almost everywhere. In fact, the individual keeps mistaking the signs for the reality of which the signs are but a trace.

As a result, the person becomes involved in one "affair" after another with the things of the world. The individual is attracted by things because the seeking spirit catches a reflection of the beloved in those things. The individual "falls in love" with the things, only to discover, in time, those things are not what the spirit is really seeking after all.

The spiritual journey constitutes the search of the spirit. The spirit seeks the only Reality with which the spirit can feel fully satisfied, complete and at peace.

To sustain the spiritual journey, one needs sincerity. Without sincerity, one will never be able to withstand the trials, difficulties and challenges which the One Who is sought has created to test the quality of love of the would-be suitor.

Furthermore, once, God willing, the quest of the spirit has been realized through being reunited with the Beloved, there will be further need of sincerity. The servant proves the sincerity of his or her love by fulfilling the request made by the Beloved.

The spirit's quality of life gives expression to various capacities or potentials. These include not only intelligence but, as well, a whole spectrum of different modes of perception.

When these potentials are perfected, they become tools through which the individual serves God. Moreover, these qualities of intelligence and



perception become so many different modalities for experiencing, as well as giving expression to, love of God.

The spirit's capacity for knowledge entails two themes. One theme involves cognition. The other aspect concerns will.

The cognition referred to here is not a reference to brain functioning which is the usual sense of this term. The cognition of the spirit is a matter of the spirit's ability, when perfected, to understand through love of Divinity.

Love has its own unique way of knowing and understanding. When the individual comes to realize experientially, through the spirit, the infinite breadth, depth and richness of God's love, everything in the life of the individual becomes infused with, and illuminated by, such love. Knowledge and understanding both see through the eyes of Divine love.

Love is not passive, it is active and dynamic. That which is known and understood through the vision of Divine love is acted upon. Consequently, the quality of will entailed by the knowledge of the spirit, seeks, with God's permission, to put understanding into action in the service and worship of Divinity.

Finally, the spirit's quality of permanence encompasses dimensions of steadfastness and persistence. Each of these dimensions colors permanence in a different manner.

To be steadfast, is to be constant in one's love for, service to, and worship of God. The perfected spirit is a perpetual motion "machine" which generates a constant reflection of Divine love.

Sufi masters radiate, and glow with, this quality of steadfastness. It permeates every aspect of their being.

In addition, the quality of permanence contains the potential for persistence. Long after all traces of the body and the world have disappeared from the Face of existence, the spirit will persist in its journey from God, to God through God, by God and with God.

When we come into this world, the potentials of the spirit's capacity are unrealized for the most part. They need to be perfected.

When one steps onto the mystical path, one begins the journey toward, among other things, the perfection of the spirit. There are various stages to this journey.

Different Sufi masters describe these stages in different ways. The central themes of these descriptions, however, are essentially the same. One way of providing an overview of the stages of the journey toward perfection of the spirit is as follows.

The journey can be construed in terms of nine themes. These are: compatibility, inclination, fellowship, passion, friendship, exclusive friendship, ardent affection, enslavement and bewilderment.

Before one decides to undertake a journey with someone, one wants to have a sense of how compatible the companion is with whom one is contemplating taking the journey. Although the ultimate companion for the journey is really Divinity, one tries to evaluate compatibility through Divinity's surrogate for the journey— namely, the shaykh.

If one feels comfortable with the degree of perceived compatibility between oneself and the spiritual guide, one begins to think about departure. However, before one really gets under way, there are some unresolved matters which need to be addressed.

To begin with, one soon discovers there are some adjustments in one's thinking about, and attitudes toward, the issue of compatibility which are necessary. Most importantly, if one is fortunate, one begins to realize one must learn how to be compatible with the shaykh.

The spiritual guide is an experienced traveler. One has never been on this journey before. If one wants to reach the destination of one's journey, one had best start following the advice and counsel of the spiritual guide. This is true compatibility.

One travels beyond compatibility through inclination. To be inclined to the shaykh, and, therefore, God, is to become inclined to the way of life of the shaykh.

Over time, and if God wishes, one becomes inclined to the beliefs, values, actions, goals, and qualities of the shaykh.

Once inclination has become established, a bond of fellowship arises in relation to the shaykh. One begins to enjoy traveling with the spiritual guide. One accepts the ups and downs of the journey and is happy to be going through all of this with the shaykh as one's guide and companion of the way.

Out of the bond of fellowship, arises passion. One cannot bear to think of traveling without the shaykh. One would feel lost and adrift. Consequently, one holds tightly, passionately, to the hand of one's spiritual guide.

Friendship is given birth through passion. One keeps nothing from the friend. Nothing is hidden from the friend.

One finds comfort, contentment and peace through the friend. One confides in one friend with respect to all one's doubts, worries, concerns and difficulties. And, the friend helps one in, and with, everything.

Exclusive friendship follows upon friendship. One really has no thoughts, interests or aspirations which are not centered on the friend. Meaning, purpose, value and significance rise and set with the presence of the friend.

One has been falling in love with the shaykh since the days of compatibility, but in the stage of ardent affection one begins to feel the stirring of a deep, intense, abiding affection for the shaykh. One fears doing anything which would displease the spiritual guide.

In the stage of ardent affection, even on the most storm filled days, the sun shines brilliantly and warmly when the shaykh is pleased with one. On the other hand, even on the sunniest of days, the air is heavy with darkness and sadness when one feels the shaykh is displeased with one's efforts or demeanor on the path.

At the far edge of the stage of ardent affection, one trips over enslavement, and falls deeply, completely, and desperately in love. In this condition, one gladly would sacrifice whatever one has, or is, for the shaykh.

When enslaved by love, one's life has no meaning or value except in the context of one's love for the shaykh. All one's joy, happiness, and fulfillment are derived from being engaged in loving service to, and for, the shaykh.

Bewilderment is the next stop on the journey after enslavement. So many different manifestations of the wonder, majesty and beauty of love are disclosed in this condition that one becomes overwhelmed.

One both understands and does not understand at the same time. In short, one is bewitched, bothered and bewildered—in a spiritual sense, of course.

All through the foregoing journey, there is a growing realization within the individual. This growing realization manifests itself in a different way with each new stage.

The nature of the realization is this. One's companion on the journey is far more complex than one originally imagined to be the case.

The shaykh is, on the one hand, a unique manifestation of all of the shaykhs who have preceded the spiritual guide on the mystical path. Furthermore, the shaykh is a unique, reflected manifestation of the entire Prophetic tradition.

On the other hand, the wayfarer realizes more and more that underwriting all of these manifestations is none other than Divinity.

God is: teaching, helping, supporting, protecting, guiding, nurturing, and transforming the individual through the agencies of manifestation we recognize as the shaykh, the saints, and the Prophets.

When these realizations come to their full fruition with the completion of the aforementioned journey of love, the spirit, with all its previously discussed qualities, will become perfected. Thereafter, everything which is: done, seen, heard, willed, experienced, perceived, spoken, known, understood, sought, and yearned for, will be in terms of, and an expression of, Divine love. Such love will be the modest, dignified, tranquil, steadfast, persistent love of the servant of God.

## Chapter 68

### Autonomy

The struggle to establish control over our lives is a theme which is intimately woven into the fabric of our existence. In one way or another, we all seek to carve out a place on which we can stand and defend ourselves against intrusions into, and possible threats to, our space, our privacy, our movements, our choices, our time, our possessions, and our identities.

From the very earliest days of our developmental odyssey, the story of our growth is influenced greatly by skirmishes and battles concerning the perceived locus of control in our lives. Our relationship with parents, siblings, relatives, play mates, neighbors, religious figures, school mates, teachers, adolescent friends, bosses, work mates, clients, romantic liaisons, in-laws and children frequently revolve around problems of whom gets to set the agenda for how, or if, the relationship will proceed and under what set of conditions.

We tend to define whom we are and aren't according to the character and outcome of all the different kind of locus-of-control issues which run through our lives. How serious were they? How intense? Were they protracted? What tactics were used?

How important was control in any given instance? Was it an atmosphere of take no prisoners or were there civil negotiations? How long were the periods of relative peace between significant differences of opinion concerning locus of control problems? Were there peaceful alternatives available to hostile encounters? Did the confrontations do lasting damage or were they no big deal?

The answer to all the above questions, and many others of a similar nature that might be asked, will have a profound impact on us. They will affect our sense of: identity, integrity, self-esteem, and ability to function effectively in a variety of social settings.

If we are lucky, we come out of all this with, perhaps, a few bruises and a couple of scars. However, our basic feeling about ourselves as, in some non-trivial sense, worthwhile human beings is still intact.

One might even argue our sense of self has been enhanced by the rigors of, and lessons learned from, that developmental process. Moreover, we have "war" stories to swap with other people—stories that both link us

to, as well as differentiate us from, other people who have gone through their own operational theater of developmental conflicts.

If we are unlucky, we end up as casualties. Even worse, we may end up creating other casualties.

We may survive these wars, but we do not always do so free of the horrendous ramifications which may ensue from the seemingly unending years of conflicts. Emotional trauma, arrested psychological development, inability to form intimate relationships with others, poor self-esteem, various kinds of stress syndrome, under-achievement, over-achievement, ambivalence, confusion, inability to commit oneself, debilitating anxiety, and a free-floating malaise, are but a few of the dysfunctional possibilities which we may carry with us as mementoes of the 'campaigns' marking different stages of our formative years.

There is a very fundamental sense in which much of what goes on in politics, economics, marriage and other social institutions is dominated by contentious forays into battlefields strewn with bunkers of resistance involving locus of control, perceived or actual. Such battlefields are disasters waiting to happen because they bring together a highly volatile mixture of unresolved or problematically resolved locus of control issues from our collective developmental processes.

Issues of: right or wrong; just or unjust; democratic or undemocratic; equitable or inequitable; legal or illegal; and, reasonable or unreasonable often form only the playing field in which locus of control issues become the game within the game. We talk in terms of values, rights, freedoms, truth and the 'good' as being the reasons for struggling in, say, the political or economic arena. Yet, in reality, we frequently use such language in order to shift attention away from the fact that, more often than not, the issue which actually is being contended is a matter of locus of control in and of itself.

We want to do whatever appeals to us, and we want to do it whenever it appeals to us to do so. Moreover, what appeals to us may not be a function of what is, ultimately, actually true or good or right or just; rather, what appeals to us tends to be a function of our own desires, independent of considerations of truth, justice and so on.

Indeed, we often try to argue that our desires necessarily reflect what is true or good or just or right. As a result, we convince ourselves that the alleged equivalence between our desires and all that is good and true justifies the locus of control being under our tender, fiduciary care.

From the Sufi perspective, true autonomy is not primarily a question of how we fare in conflicts involving locus of control issues vis a vis other people, whether in the past or the present. A Sufi is only free when she or he has realized the essential self and acts in accordance with that nature.

For the Sufi, an individual could be in prison or in chains or limited by the constraints imposed by others. Yet, the individual still could have autonomy if the person were to respond to those conditions in terms of the individual's essential nature and true self.

On the other hand, a person might, seemingly, possess the locus of control concerning the lives of other people. Nevertheless, this individual might have no substantive autonomy because the person's essential nature was in bondage to, and imprisoned by, the person's own desires—the entity which actually is setting the agenda.

Such an individual may be "free" to desire. However, this person does not have autonomy over those desires.

The Sufi does not seek control over the lives of other people. The Sufi does not enter into conflict with others over matters of locus of control.

The true locus of control is with God. The Sufi attempts to discern how that locus of control is being manifested in any given set of circumstances. Once this has been determined, then, the individual, according to the person's capacity and God's support, will merge horizons with the structural character of that locus of control as it unfolds over time.

The locus of control is a manifestation of God's will and gives expression to the passion-play of existence. The more attuned one is to God's will, the greater will be one's ability to detect, and adapt to, the shifting currents of the manifestation which are being expressed through the passion play as it reflects the will of God.

We adapt ourselves to the will of God, not by trying to change or control others, but by changing, and having autonomy over, our desires and intentions and attitudes. In fact, the great tragedy of so much of the developmental process is that very few people involved in the struggle over

issues of locus of control have any understanding of, or insight into, what the real issues of locus of control are.

More specifically, the issue is not about which of the people engaged in a conflict is able to win the battle of dominance in any given set of circumstances. The issue is how do we collectively realize our essential autonomy so we can find harmonious and creative ways to align ourselves with the will of God as it manifests itself through the currents and eddies of the passion play of existence in which we are participant observers.

There is something deeply, intrinsically attractive about those people who are able, by the Grace of God, to accomplish this kind of transformation. In fact, it is deliciously ironic that such people, who do not seek, or wish, to have control over others, end up influencing the desires of so many people who are inspired by their example and want to follow in their footsteps and seek the same sort of transformative essential autonomy exemplified in the lives of individuals such as the Sufi masters.



## **Chapter 69**

### **Fanaticism**

What qualifies one as a fanatic? What are the characteristics of fanaticism?

Generally speaking, a fanatic is someone who is described as having an unreasonable or intemperate enthusiasm for a cause, belief, activity, or the like. If one can pin down what is meant by an "unreasonable or intemperate" enthusiasm, one will be well on one's way to having some idea of what fanaticism entails.

As simple as this task of pinning down the meaning of "unreasonable" or "intemperate" appears to be at first glance, one encounters a number of difficulties. For example, whose perspective will we use with respect to determining what constitutes unreasonableness or intemperateness?

Consider a person who is very career oriented. Let us suppose this individual works 16-17 hours a day, seven days a week. Let us assume further this person tends: not to take vacations; goes into work on holidays; takes work home; doesn't take sick leave; associates only with colleagues or industry people, and talks shop with anyone and everyone that comes along.

Is this person's enthusiasm for work unreasonable or intemperate? The board of directors of the company for which the individual works probably does not think so. The individual's boss or supervisor might feel the person is only meeting the industry or company standard and may even want the individual to squeeze in a few more hours somewhere during the week.

Colleagues may or may not want to work that many hours but, very likely, would not see anything unreasonable or intemperate in such commitment to work. Ambition, moving up the corporate ladder, competition, fear of being fired, corporate politics, a struggling company, and so on – all of these can all contribute to this kind of work profile.

On the other hand, the husband or wife of this individual may have a different view of the matter. In addition, the children who rarely ever see this parent are not likely to consider such behavior very reasonable or temperate. Furthermore, the family physician may feel the person in question is driving himself or herself into an unnecessarily early grave

and what would be reasonable or temperate about depriving oneself of life?

One person's commitment is often another person's idea of fanaticism. Capitalists frequently consider communists to be fanatics and vice versa. Corporations tend to label environmentalists as fanatics, and environmentalists sometimes refer to corporations in a similar fashion. Military and anti-military groups also square-off over against one another concerning, among other things, which of the two sides consists of fanatics.

In all of the foregoing cases, a fanatic tends to be anyone who has considerable enthusiasm for something which does not meet with one's approval. On the other hand, one who shows a great deal of zeal for something of which one approves is considered to be a person whose dedication is an inspiration to all reasonable people.

Ideally, one would like, if possible, to come up with an understanding of fanaticism which does not depend on whether or not one approves of that to which a commitment is made. The aspect of approval seems to entangle the issue in the arbitrary shifts of subjective likes and dislikes.

Besides an unreasonable enthusiasm, fanaticism, earlier on, was also characterized as involving an intemperate enthusiasm. The quality of immoderation may be a less problematic indicator to use as an index for the possible presence of fanaticism than is the quality of approval or disapproval of that to which someone commits herself or himself.

One of the things which strikes one about someone who works 16-17 hours a day, seven days a week, is the lack of balance in that individual's life. We may admire the person's work ethic, and we can leave aside, for the moment, whether we approve of what the individual does. Nonetheless, a life which involved nothing else but this narrowly focused expenditure of time, energy and talents would seem to express a rather excessive and intemperate enthusiasm for a given activity: namely, a specific kind of work.

Under such narrowly conceived conditions, emotional, mental and physical health is considered expendable. One's spouse becomes unimportant. One's family is subject to sacrifice.

Spirituality has no place in one's life. Rest and relaxation are cut from one's temporal budget. There is no room for expanding one's horizons in non-work related areas. Community problems are not one's concerns. One has no time for environmental issues.

In short, there is no harmony or balance in the life of the person outlined previously. The individual's life is not tempered and temperate. It lacks moderation.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, everyone with whom we interact has certain rights over us. Our spouses, children, relatives, neighbors, and community all have certain rights over us.

We owe them all duties of care and consideration. They have claims on our time, energy, talents, intellect and compassion, as well as our money.

If we permit any commitment, work or otherwise, to undermine such duties of care and consideration, then we are doing injustice to those around us. We are depriving them of what we owe them from our humanity.

In addition, we owe a duty of care to ourselves and to God. If we permit commitments in certain parts of our lives to dominate us to the exclusion of realizing our essential identity and to the exclusion of our spiritual obligations to God, we are treating ourselves and God with injustice.

Furthermore, we have a spiritual responsibility to be guardians and caretakers in relation to the rest of creation. This responsibility imposes on us certain parameters of permissibility concerning the way we can and cannot interact with nature.

To be moderate and temperate in our lives, is, from the perspective of Sufi masters, to bring all of the aforementioned duties of care into harmony and balance so that, as far as is possible, justice is done to all manner of being.

From this point of view, fanaticism is a matter of any sort of enthusiasm which, on a fairly consistent basis, prevents us from bringing the different dimensions of our life into the sort of balance which would permit us to, God willing, fulfill the duties of care we have to God, other people, nature and ourselves.

Intolerance is also frequently mentioned in discussions of fanaticism. In other words, a fanatic is someone who tends to be intolerant

of others who do not share her or his intemperate enthusiasm for a given kind of commitment.

Sufi masters maintain intolerance is a major source of the injustice we do to others. When we are intolerant toward others, we are not in a position to observe our duties of care and consideration with respect to those people.

Intolerance affects our fiduciary equilibrium in the overall harmony of our duties of care. We become emotionally and conceptually weighted in certain ways, and, as a result, we cannot keep our spiritual balance. When we lose our spiritual balance, we commit injustice.

Consequently, fanaticism is the predisposition of an individual to commit injustice as a result of intolerance toward those who do not share a given enthusiastic commitment one has. Moreover, the nature of this enthusiastic commitment is such that it has compromised our duties of care and consideration to others.

Frequently, the term fanaticism is used in contexts of religious beliefs. However, the foregoing characterization clearly indicates almost any kind of enthusiastic zeal involving intemperate and intolerant behavior and, therefore, which generates disharmony and injustice, is an expression of fanaticism.

Religion, politics, economics, philosophy, science, careers, families, literature, education, patriotism, journalism, war, culture, class, sexuality, addiction, business, government, law, sports, and so on, are all capable of giving birth to fanaticism. In fact, fanaticism of all manner of descriptions are probably among the most prevalent and persistent forms of problem facing humanity today.

## Chapter 70

### Ibadat

Some people have an extremely distorted idea about the nature of worship (ibadat). They are under the impression God is in need of worship.

However, this is not so. Human beings are in need of worshipping God. God does not need the worship of human beings.

Those individuals that believe worship is something which benefits God apparently consider God to be so insecure that Divinity requires constant reassurance from human beings. These people make it sound as if God were saying: "Please, women and men, tell Me again how wonderful I am and how great I am. My Self-esteem is a little shaky today."

Alternatively, maybe these people are implying God is addicted to vanity and needs to hear praise over and over again. In fact, one might suppose a logical progression of this sort of thinking is to believe God punishes people who do not worship Divinity because such people become like a drug pusher who holds out on the one who desperately needs a fix. In the light of this kind of scenario, hell is the revenge, in spades, of an addict scorned.

Sufi masters have a completely different perspective on the issue of worship. To begin with, they maintain God is totally independent of any need of what human beings do or do not do.

Our existence is an act of Divine generosity and love. Something has been given to human beings for which we have done nothing to deserve and which can never be reciprocated in kind by us.

To be sure, we have been created in accordance with a Divine Plan. Yet, the purpose of this plan is all to the benefit of human beings.

God is not getting anything out of it that was not possessed already by Divinity. God, in Essence, is sharing Divinity, as manifested through Attributes, with Divinity, as manifested through human reflections of those Attributes.

Unfortunately, we are, for the most part, too dumb to appreciate what God is doing for us. Thus, there is a human need for worship.

Worship is the path which, if God wishes, leads from, on the one hand, human ignorance, darkness and density, to, on the other hand, the gnosis,

light and subtlety of Divinity. Worship, when done properly, is the ongoing spiritual realization of, and bearing witness to, the Presence of Divinity in every aspect and facet of human existence.

For many of us, worship is something of a burden. We struggle and strain and huff and puff and sweat and fret to produce some pathetic, tattered, stumbling spiritual offering.

Some of us fervently hope these offerings bear a remote resemblance to expressions of worship which are minimally acceptable to God, worried as we are about the cut off points for heaven and hell. Others among us are quite taken with "our" efforts, as if we actually had the capacity to do anything on our own. Still others among us, are resentful we should have to make any such efforts whatsoever, as if we were doing God a favor.

Our attempts at worship seem to be saturated with resistance, doubts, uncertainty, conflict, weakness, obstacles, inconsistencies and ambivalence. This is so because our false selves or egos are busy doing everything within their power and capacity to oppose worship of God.

If worship of God can be converted to worship of the ego, the difficulties often will stop. The ego will even permit the external character of the spiritual framework to remain as a front for the underlying non-spiritual reality of things. We seem to find consolation and solace in, at least, being surrounded by the trappings of spirituality, despite the absence of its essence.

Ultimately, worship is not about forms and rituals, although the journey to real worship must begin there. In fact, only when real worship is attained, does the essential value and meaning of the forms and rituals become transparent and alive with truth.

For most of us, however, the forms and rituals are like dead things to us because we are like dead things to them. We may go through the motions, but our minds and hearts are in a state of suspended animation.

For Sufi masters, worship is the essence of life itself. When one becomes attuned to the nature and purpose of life, one becomes worship.

One can never become worship as long as the ego is trying to usurp the role of Divinity. Worship cannot take place in an atmosphere of lordship, only of servanthood.

By the grace of God, worship flows through the intentions of Sufi masters. By the grace of God, worship takes flight on the wings of sincerity of the Sufi shaykhs.

Through the grace of God, the thoughts, feelings and actions of the Sufi masters all become modalities of worship. This is so because every thought, feeling and action reflects the active presence of Divinity in the life of Sufi masters.

Among the Sufi masters, family life, social interaction, worldly activities, spiritual practices, work, sleeping and eating all become occasions for worship. By the grace of God, nothing is done or undertaken by Sufi masters except as an expression of a servant's knowing and aware intention of loving service to Divinity which is present, as manifestation, in the form of the server, the service, and the served.





## Chapter 71

### Love

People speak about falling in, and out of, love. According to Sufi masters, if one falls out of love, there is one thing of which one can be sure: one was never really in love in the first place.

Love may come in all kinds of strange, unexpected ways. Yet, once love comes, it comes to stay.

Love leaves an indelible impression on the heart and soul of an individual. Its stamp is impervious to the erosive tendencies of worldly circumstances.

In fact, the difficulties and tribulations of life merely become so many opportunities for love to bring forth its cornucopia of fruits. Like a fine wine, love becomes better with time.

Love has nothing to do with sexual relationships. Although many people confuse and conflate the two, there are a number of fundamental differences between the two. Sexuality tends to be dead to everything but itself. Everything, including sexuality, comes alive through love.

Love is frequently underrated. Sexuality is often overrated. Sexuality rides on the crest of moods. Love transcends moods.

Love involves denial of the ego. Sexuality involves affirmation of the ego.

Sexuality very frequently leads to betrayal. Love can never lead to betrayal.

In love, something always is being found. In sexuality, something always is being sought.

The intensity of sexuality leaves. The intensity of love remains. In order for love to be enjoyed fully, one must be absent. In order for sexuality to be enjoyed fully, one must be present.

Sexuality always involves an act of disengagement. This never occurs with love. With love, what is, is more than enough. With sexuality, more is never enough.

One can exhaust the mystery of sexuality. One can never exhaust the mystery of love.

Love is willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of others. Sexuality is willing to sacrifice others for its own sake.

Sexuality is addictive. Love is liberating. Love is a vocation. Sexuality is an avocation.

With sexuality, there is separation during union. With love, there is union during separation.

One becomes occupied with love. One becomes preoccupied with sexuality. One can abstain from sexuality. One cannot abstain from love.

Love leads toward essence. Sexuality leads away from essence.

With sexuality, one runs the risk of many diseases. In love, there is a cure for many diseases.

One is prepared to die for love. One is prepared to kill for sexuality. A life full of sexuality is common. A life full of love is rare.

Love flourishes with constancy. Sexuality thrives on variability.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, the love of the spiritual guide for the initiate, is a sign of God's love for the seeker. Alternatively, the love of the seeker for the shaykh is a reflection of the individual's love for God.

An initiate is obedient to the shaykh because the spiritual guide is the khalifah or vicegerent of God. An initiate desires to learn from the shaykh because the teacher is the one through whom God is providing spiritual guidance, support and assistance for the seeker. An initiate has love for the shaykh because the spiritual guide is a very special locus of manifestation of God's love for the individual.

Sometimes, due to the confusion in the minds and hearts of people concerning love and sexuality, a seeker will interpret the attention, kindness and love of the spiritual master to be an expression of sexual attraction. This misinterpretation may be complicated by the individual's history of being starved for affection and/or being involved in exploitive or abusive sexual relationships.

This can lead to a very difficult trial for both the seeker and the guide. The seeker must learn the difference between love and sexuality without feeling rejected by the teacher. The teacher must try to nourish the seed of love in the seeker without encouraging the weeds of sexuality to grow.

In addition, the attention and the affection which the spiritual master gives to one initiate may, through no fault of the shaykh, engender jealousy in other initiates. This jealousy may be fueled by unresolved problems of sexuality concerning the shaykh, or it may be underwritten by other aspects of the ego, or some combination of the two.

As a result of the foregoing kinds of possibilities, some initiates will begin to project their problems onto the shaykh. In other words, instead of the individual recognizing whatever is going on as originating with himself or herself, the teacher is imagined to be guilty of various kinds of sexual impropriety. Consequently, sometimes even the most innocuous gestures, comments, glances and so on of the spiritual guide, become interpreted through these lenses of confusion.

To be sure, there are sexual predators who come dressed in the garb of spirituality. People do get exploited and abused by "spiritual" charlatans. In fact, sexuality is just one such possibility in the realm of exploitation.

There also are people who claim to be spiritual guides, yet, who, on the one hand, have not resolved their own confusions concerning love and sexuality, and, on the other hand, have not mastered their own egos. Consequently, these sort of people often lead others astray spiritually and, as well, permit themselves to be led astray in the same fashion.

The foregoing comments notwithstanding, a Sufi master is concerned with matters of love, not sexuality. However, because of the times, and the kind of society, in which we live, many Sufi shaykhs are called upon to minister to people's sexual problems through the healing properties of love.

Some people are never able to come to a proper understanding of these issues. For a variety of reasons, such people end up hating the shaykh they once professed to love. This only means they did not love the shaykh in the first place.

Anyone, in a spiritual context, who would be willing to give preference to sexuality over love, or who confuses the two, is admitting the following. The individual is acknowledging that she or he never has drunk the wine of love drawn from the mystical vineyards of Divinity.

One who has had the latter experience would not risk, God willing, the treasure of Divine love for the whole world. Therefore, mere sex would be a sordid substitute for the treasure in question.

## Chapter 72

### Catalysis

Catalysis is a process affecting the speed at which a chemical reaction takes place. This is accomplished by introducing an agent into a reaction system that is capable of either speeding up or retarding the rate at which such a reaction proceeds.

In those circumstances when a catalytic agent speeds up the reaction process, the agent is known as a positive catalyst. Agents which impede the reaction rate of a given system are referred to as negative catalysts.

In some instances, a reaction will proceed in the absence of the right kind of catalyst. However, the reaction will do so only very, very slowly. In other cases, a reaction will not proceed at all in the absence of appropriate kinds of catalyst.

Not all catalytic agents perform their function in the same way. Some agents have the ability to bring various components of a reaction into closer proximity than would be possible in the absence of that agent, thus speeding up the rate of reaction of those components.

Other catalytic agents have the means of increasing the surface area necessary for certain reactions to take place. With more surface area available for interaction, the reaction proceeds more quickly than would be the case under non-catalytic circumstances.

Still other kinds of catalyst speed up or slow down reactions by changing the conformational and/or ionic character of the components of a reaction. This is especially true in the biochemical reactions of living systems.

Some catalytic agents have the capacity to lower or raise the level of energy necessary for a given kind of reaction to occur. Thus, for example, when the energy of activation for a reaction is lowered by introducing the appropriate kind of catalyst, the reaction can proceed much more quickly with the same amount of energy in the system than would be the case 'normally'.

Some catalytic agents retard the rate of reaction by becoming competitors with one or more of the components involved in a reaction. When such catalysts occupy surface areas or membrane sites and, thereby, make them

unavailable for components necessary for a given reaction, this competitive inhibition, as it is known, slows down the rate at which the reaction proceeds.

There are many other modalities of catalysis. However, the few which have been mentioned are enough for present purposes.

According to the masters of the Sufi path, spiritual development or progress, especially in the mystical sense, either will not take place without catalytic assistance, or, it will do so only at an exceedingly slow rate. In fact, to the extent spiritual progress does occur at all in the absence of the appropriate catalytic agents, it, nonetheless, will be incapable of permitting the individual to make much headway toward the ultimate purpose of spiritual growth which is the realization of the true self.

Mysticism is not an endeavor in which an individual working entirely independently can succeed. The mystical heights cannot be scaled through sheer brilliance, talent or determination.

There are no solitary ascents on the mystical path. Support and assistance and catalytic additives are all necessary for anyone who seeks to reach the top.

Sufi masters do admit that not all people have the same spiritual capacity. Like gifts of intelligence, artistic talent, beauty, athletic ability and so on, spiritual potential is not distributed equally.

These differences in spiritual potential may affect the speed with which spiritual development proceeds. On the other hand, spiritual capacity is not the only factor affecting the rate of progress.

In fact, someone who has less spiritual potential than another individual might not only develop more quickly than the gifted person but actually travel farther on the path than her or his more gifted companion. Qualities of sincerity, perseverance, desire and effort also affect whether, and at what rate, spiritual growth takes place.

The sine qua non of catalytic reagents is God's grace. Absolutely nothing takes place without the presence of this support and assistance.

One could say every modality of help, support, assistance, protection, and catalysis (both positive as well as negative) one encounters on the Sufi path is an expression of God's grace. Differences in the form or character of the locus through which the grace comes, does not alter the underlying reality of grace standing behind such variable manifestations.

Notwithstanding the foregoing comments, spiritual catalytic agents come in different varieties. Prayer, fasting, chanting, charitable acts, spiritual etiquette, night vigils, contemplation, meditation, and reading sacred texts, all, each in its own way: both, give expression to God's grace, as well as, serve as a means to open one up to more grace.

Each of the above mentioned practices or observances has unique spiritual benefits and effects. The Sufi master is one who, by the grace of God, knows what the aspirant requires, at any given time, in the way of practices. Since we are all different spiritual capacities and potentials, some spiritual catalytic agents may be more effective forms of assistance to some of us, than others, among us.

Furthermore, the package of practices may change in character during the course of the spiritual journey as our catalytic needs change during the journey. For example, at certain stages of the path, the teacher may indicate to the student that invoking a certain Name or Attribute of God may be especially beneficial for the individual. At another stage, another Name or Attribute of God may be given for invocation.

At one stage, the spiritual guide may recommend the individual become busy with charitable works. At another stage, more emphasis may be given by the teacher to concentrating on the inculcation of spiritual etiquette in the aspirant.

The general package of practices and observances stays roughly the same. However, the combinations and focal concerns involving this general package may shift during the journey: from stage to stage for a given person, as well as from individual to individual.

In all of this, the Sufi master is somewhat like a spiritual chemist who has expertise in, among other things, the use and effects of different spiritual catalytic agents. Using one of these catalytic agents may help alter the spiritual orientation of the individual's heart in a certain way. Use of another catalyst may help retard the rational mind's interference in spiritual matters.

Use of another agent may have a catalytic property of opening the individual up to various spiritual experiences. This may have the effect of increasing the spiritual "surface area" available for certain kinds of reactions to proceed.

Still other catalysts, in the form of specific spiritual practices, may have an effect comparable to a lowering of the energy of activation necessary for a particular spiritual process to proceed. Alternatively, use of a given

catalytic medium may provide the individual with the enabling power needed to overcome normal obstacles standing in the way of making spiritual progress on some aspect of the path.

Some spiritual catalysts may help change the shape and character of a person's understanding.

Other spiritual catalytic agents may give expression to a form of competitive inhibition by preoccupying the individual with, say the remembrance of God, and, as a result, helping to prevent the world or the ego from gaining access to sites of attachment within consciousness or one's heart.

The primary form of catalytic agent is the spiritual guide or master. Practices, of one sort or another, all have their value and their special catalytic properties. However, one could be engaged in such practices from now until the end of time without any significant essential spiritual benefit manifesting itself as long as one did so in isolation from a spiritual teacher. All of the Sufi masters are in agreement on this point.

The teacher is, in a sense, the straw that stirs the drink. Or, perhaps, more appropriately, the teacher is the one who has responsibility for ensuring that all the right catalytic ingredients and reactants get into the drink in the right proportions and in the correct sequence and at the most efficacious time.

God, of course, provides the drink, the straw, the tavern, the drinkers, the entertainment, the trained staff and everything else which is necessary for the reactants to be able to come together to have the desired spiritual results. The teacher is the one who is looking after things on behalf of the tavern's proprietor. The teacher is the one who, by God's grace, becomes the locus of catalytic manifestation through which things are brought together in the Sufi tavern in an organized and effective manner.



## Chapter 73

### Yaqueen

There are different kinds and degrees of yaqueen or certainty. Yaqueen is very much tied to the sort of experiences one has had.

Consider some of the ways in which an individual might come to learn about, say, one, or more, of the oceans of the world. There are various degrees of certainty associated with different kinds of knowledge or understanding.

For example, let us imagine there is a person who has overheard some puzzling conversations by travelers passing through the region about something called an "ocean". These wayfarers even may have described various aspects of this 'ocean'.

If the individual does not know the travelers and does not know about oceans, she or he has no way of knowing if they are telling the truth or telling stories. All the person knows is that prior to the overheard conversation he or she had never encountered such an idea.

Next, let us suppose, the individual goes to a regional library and begins to look up information on oceans. The person: reads a few books on oceanography; sees a variety of photographs of different oceans; and, maybe, watches an educational film or two about oceans.

Certainly, the person now has more information at his or her disposal than before. However, this information still is secondhand and removed from the actual ocean.

The individual begins to think a lot about oceans and desires to see one. Consequently, the individual makes arrangements to go on a journey to the ocean described in the library material as being closest to where the person lives.

The individual goes on a trip to the ocean and reaches the desired destination. Soon, the person is walking along the shore and gazing at the ocean.

Let us assume the person eventually comes to a marina where there are boats for rent. The individual is the adventurous sort and decides to take a small boat out on the bay.

While rowing or sailing about, the person sees some people in the water engaged in various kinds of activity. Later, after describing the activity to someone on shore, the individual finds out these people were swimming.

Swimming seems a rather intriguing thing to do. Therefore, after buying the appropriate apparel, the individual proceeds to wade into the water and splash about in the shallows near the shore.

During this "swimming" session, the person comes across some people who are getting ready to go scuba diving. Questions are asked, and answers are given.

When the individual comes out of the water, someone gives the person a flyer about a school for scuba diving which has just opened at the marina. Naturally, the individual signs up.

After receiving the appropriate instruction, the person rents some equipment and begins seeking someone with whom to dive. As luck would have it, such a person is found, and they begin diving at various locations near the marina.

During various conversations with the new found companion, our wayfarer finds out one can go much deeper in the ocean than had been the case on their previous dives. However, different equipment is necessary, depending on how far down one wants to go.

Having come this far, our wayfarer is not interested in being limited to diving only a hundred feet, or so, beneath the surface. This individual wants to go as deeply into the ocean as possible.

The person begins finding out all about deep-sea submergible vehicles. One of the things learned during this period of study is how dangerous such voyages can be and that only a fool would try to undertake such a project alone.

Therefore, the individual sets about trying to find a knowledgeable diver who would be willing to tolerate the ignorance and inexperience of the wayfarer. Not being sure where to look first, the individual goes to the Yellow Pages.

The Yellow Pages contain listings for: deep-sea tele-presence; deep-sea mapping; deep-sea secrets; deep-sea advisory boards; deep-sea consultants; deep-sea vision; deep-sea explorations; deep-sea books; deep-sea imaging; deep-sea mining; deep-sea virtual reality; deep-sea resources; deep-sea

junk; deep-sea mysteries; deep-sea salvage; deep-sea treasures, and quite a few other entries. The individual is confused with all the choices.

Eventually, after spending considerable time and effort in checking out various possibilities, and after a few false starts, the individual stumbles across the path of an authentic expert. Fortunately, this expert also has a weakness and compassion for training novices in the area of deep-sea diving.

The expert, nevertheless, sets one condition on the arrangement. At some point, the individual must choose between the life on land or the life at sea.

The individual spends a number of years learning about submersible vehicles, currents, navigation and so on under the guidance of the veteran diver. Finally, the time comes for the individual to dive into the depths of the ocean.

As the two get prepared for the dive, they are beset by people protesting their proposed venture into the deep. Some of the protesters believe the dive is in contravention of various laws. Others among the protestors believe the resources being assigned to the dive could be put to better use elsewhere. Some of the people fear the dive could upset the balance of nature.

Protests notwithstanding, the dive is made. During this dive, the individual sees and witnesses all kinds of incredible, beautiful things which, previously, had not been conceived of by the individual.

The individual reaches a depth which is beyond the scale of the vessel's gauges. Suddenly, there is incredible light all around, where previously there only had been darkness. The light is alive with knowledge, love and many other qualities as well.

The person wonders if this is a symptom of some form of depth psychosis about which the individual once read. The veteran diver says this is not the case. The person is told something similar happens almost to everyone who reaches this depth, although the precise character of the experience varies with the individual.

The wayfarer comes away from this voyage determined to commit the rest of his or her life to being a deep-sea diver. The experiences encountered in the depths of the ocean have had a transforming effect on what the individual feels and thinks about the purpose, meaning, value and significance of life.

Moreover, this new found understanding is not conceptual in nature. It is experiential, direct, and essential.

When the two deep sea divers return to land, there are some media people waiting to interview them. These reporters have come to find out both: about the controversy created by the encounter between the divers and the protesters, as well as about some rumors concerning their extraordinary experiences during their dive.

Most of what transpired during the dive is really beyond description. However, the two divers try their best to give the media people a sense of what the dive was like.

The reporters ask a lot of questions and seem rather skeptical about the story of the two divers. With all due respect to the two individuals, the account of the divers, nonetheless, seems to the reporters to be rather vague, phantasmal and far-fetched.

A number of the media group have advanced degrees of one sort or another. However, none of them has ever done anything more than a little snorkeling.

The reporters all feel, based on their years of media experience, quite certain there are ample reasons for not taking the accounts of the divers seriously. Consequently, if they report about the divers at all, the pieces will be treated, at best, as some sort of entertaining, weird human interest story and not as hard news.

The two divers invite the media people to join them in the next dive as participant-observers. The veteran diver indicates one really cannot understand the experience of deep-sea diving unless one undergoes the experiences oneself.

Details concerning departure time and so on are given. Several of the reporters indicate considerable interest in following up on this invitation.

When the time arrives for the next dive, none of the media people show up. Apparently, the reporters have something else in mind when they speak of investigative reporting.

The veteran diver reminds the individual of the condition set some time ago when the person first came seeking assistance in deep-sea diving. More specifically, the individual has to make a choice between the ways of life on land and the ways of life in the ocean depths.

The veteran diver points out that, now, the wayfarer knows what people, such as the reporters, and those influenced by the reporters, think about deep-sea diving. The individual is asked: "Which is more important: the theories, opinions and conjectures of others concerning experiences which they have not had, or one's own experiences which have been confirmed by an expert in such matters?"

The wayfarer says the latter is more important. Therefore, the choice of the individual is to opt for the way of life of the ocean depths.

The two divers proceed to head out to sea. They again dive to the depths and find it as exhilarating and joyous as the last time.

During this voyage, there are many difficulties and problems which arise. As a result of these challenges and tests, the individual comes to learn many important things concerning life, character and identity.

Over the years, a deep bond of love and friendship arises between the two divers. The veteran diver shares a wealth of understanding, knowledge, wisdom and experience with our wayfarer.

Several decades later, there are reports the two have been lost at sea. Some say they are dead. Some say they found a hidden treasure in the deepest part of the ocean. Some say they are in the Bermuda Triangle or aboard the Flying Dutchman. God, alone, knows the truth of any of these accounts.

The disappearance is covered by the same group of media people who interviewed the divers many years earlier. These reporters really don't know anything more now concerning the ocean than they did before. Furthermore, they know very little about the lives led, or the experiences encountered, by the two divers since they last were all together.

Nonetheless, at least, these reporters had some personal contact with the divers. Therefore, they go about reporting their stories. This is, after all, what they do for a living.

Every year, around the time of the reported disappearance, there are public gatherings. These functions commemorate the spirit of commitment and exploration exemplified in the lives of the two divers.

On these occasions, learned speakers come and deliver various kinds of addresses. Some of these lectures are based on studies and experiments,

completed under simulated conditions in the laboratory, concerning the lives of deep-sea divers.

Some of the speakers talk about their computer models of deep-sea diving. Still others have worked out an impressive array of mathematical equations and formulae which purport to capture the spirit and essence of deep-sea diving.

There are some people who commemorate these occasions in a slightly different way. On the basis of a variety of evidence, including eye-witness reports, they feel certain the divers still are alive. Consequently, they organize search parties to go looking for the divers who have disappeared.

The travelers, the library, the marina, the boat, the swimmers, the person passing out handbills, the scuba-diving school, the scuba divers, the organizations and businesses in the Yellow Pages, the deep-sea divers, the protestors, the media people, the learned scholars, and the search parties, all have a relationship with the ocean. All of these relationships are rooted in experiences of one kind or another.

Some of these experiences are quite removed from the realities of the ocean. Other experiences come from the ocean depths. Still other experiences fall somewhere in between the foregoing two possibilities.

All of the parties feel varying degrees of certainty concerning the truth of their experiences. Some of those who feel certain actually may be correct. Still others not only may be correct, but they actually also may know this to be so.

## Chapter 74

### Justice

Justice involves knowing what is due to everyone and everything. Naturally, this raises the question: how does one determine what -- if anything -- is due to any given person or aspect of creation?

Unfortunately, knowing what is due may not be enough. Presumably, we also would need to know when and where we should give what is due. In addition, we probably would need to know how to give what is due when and where we give it. Furthermore, maybe knowing why we are giving what is due to whomever, when and where it is supposed to be given and in accordance with how we are suppose to do this, also might be part of a just act.

Even if we managed to know the: whom, what, when, where, how and why of justice, this still would not be enough. Surely, we need to put all of this into action.

Needing to put something into action, is not necessarily the same as being able, or being in a position, to accomplish what is needed. Consequently, doing justice would seem to presuppose not only a willingness to do justice but a capacity for struggling to bring to fruition what one wills.

Moreover, being ready, willing and capable with respect to giving: what is due, to whom it is due, where and when it is due, in accordance with how it is due, and with an understanding of why it is due, is, once again, not necessarily enough to ensure justice will be realized. Reality has to cooperate and permit us to activate our understanding and capacities concerning the doing of justice.

For many of us, justice, to the extent we think about it at all, is often a matter of our likes and dislikes. We give what we like, to whom we like, when and where we like, however we like, and for whatever reasons we like. Alternatively, to those whom we dislike, we refrain from giving whatever we like, whenever and wherever we like, however we like, and for whatever reasons we like.

All too frequently, we are not ready, willing and able to give what justice requires—assuming, of course, we knew the: whom, what, when, where, how and why of justice.

Instead, we are ready, willing and able to give whatever we are ready, willing and able to give, irrespective of whether, or not, what we have to give is just.

Many of us also tend to evaluate the justice which we believe is due to us almost entirely in terms of the satisfactions of our likes and dislikes. When we get: what we want, from whom we want, when and where we want it, in accordance with how we want it, and for the reasons we want it, this is justice in action.

Injustice, for many of us, is often the negation, in part or in its entirety, of the foregoing scenario. Moreover, many of us tend to feel injustice also occurs whenever the people we dislike get what they want or get what we would like for ourselves, while we remain deprived of our desires.

According to Sufi masters, perfect justice only comes from Divinity. Only God knows: what is due to whom, as well as when, where, how and why. Only God has the capacity and will to bring knowledge of justice to realization.

Consequently, if we wish to participate in the doing of justice, then we must seek to become a locus of manifestation for Divinity's knowledge, capacity and will in relation to the implementation of justice. Practitioners of the Sufi path maintain we only may become a locus of manifestation for Divine justice, God willing, when we become empty of, and free from, all the machinations and corrupting influences of our: passion, anger, ambition, desires, ignorance, and spiritual darkness.

Indeed, we become capable of fully extending justice to others, when we have learned how to be just to ourselves. Only by seeking to acquire what spiritually is due to ourselves from ourselves, do we work toward becoming, if God wishes, ready, willing and able to give expression to Divine justice with respect to ourselves, others, creation and God.

The Prophets, friends of God, and Sufi masters are personifications of the foregoing principle in action. By the grace of God, these people do not transgress against their own souls. In other words, they are doing, with God's help, spiritual justice to themselves. As a result, they are able to give expression to God's knowledge of what, in relation to others, is due to: whom, when, where, how and why, according to the spiritual capacity of these people of God to do so.



One only has to spend some time in association with a Sufi master to experience something of the flavor of the Divine justice being dispensed through the locus of manifestation which is the shaykh. Whoever comes to the Sufi master receives, by the grace of God, what is due to her or him.

Kindness, compassion, respect, acceptance, attention, generosity, forbearance, forgiveness, patience, love, honesty, sincerity, encouragement, and support come to those who visit with the Sufi master because this is what God has ordained to be due to these people. In fact, the when and where of their visits is so that justice can be done to those whom visit with the shaykh, and independently of the rationalizations given by them for why they have come to the shaykh.

Guidance, healing, insight, and various kinds of assistance come through Sufi masters to the intended beneficiaries because, for reasons known to God, that which is received is Divinely determined as that which is due to such people at the time and place indicated and in the manner prescribed. If justice would not be served by such giving, nothing would be forthcoming, and that, too, would be an expression of Divine justice.

Blessings, grace, favors, states and stations are given in accordance with what God knows is due to the people whom receive it. The when, where, how and why of this giving are all in accordance with Divine knowledge and will concerning the requirements of justice with respect to those who receive.

The efforts and struggles of the recipients of such blessings are not the cause for the administering of Divine justice. Rather, Divine justice is one of the secrets behind such efforts and struggles.



## **Chapter 75**

### **Patience**

To be patient, is to demonstrate a willingness to give Divine justice and/or mercy an opportunity to manifest themselves. To be patient is to have the opportunity and resources to take a particular course of action but to refrain from doing so until God makes clear the direction in which to travel.



## **Chapter 76**

### **Intoxication**

Spiritually induced intoxication -- as well as intoxication induced by spirits of alcohol -- involves departures from the realm of rationality. However, each does so in a completely different way from the other. Moreover, each form of intoxication leads an individual to totally different results and ramifications.

Alcohol is a general depressant of biological functioning, in general, and of neurophysiological functioning in particular. Different factors affect how quickly, and to what extent, any given person's biological functioning will be affected.

Nonetheless, on the whole, most people do not have to drink a great deal before their memory and thinking faculties become impaired. Not only does one begin to lose the ability to concentrate on, and carry out, a variety of logical/rational operations, but one's capacity for making different kinds of judgment also is diminished after drinking a certain amount of alcohol.

After drinking, all too many people get in their automobiles and cause death and tragedy, of one sort or another. Almost invariably, this is as a result of their impaired: reflexes, reasoning abilities and capacity to make rational judgments.

In addition, there is a strong link between the consumption of alcohol and both spousal abuse, as well as, the sexual and physical abuse of children. This sort of abuse may go on even independently of the presence of alcohol, but the problem becomes much worse when the influence of alcohol is added to the equation. Furthermore, the presence of alcohol consumption may, in many cases, induce abusive behavior with respect to one's spouse or children that might not happen were the abuser not under the influence of alcohol.

There also is a long history between consumption of alcohol and sexual assault. Perhaps alcohol is used as an excuse by some in order to diminish the moral blame associated with such acts. Maybe these people would indulge in acts of sexual assault even without the alcohol, but the alcohol becomes a convenient scapegoat. Alternatively, due to the diminished capacity induced by alcohol intoxication, people often find

themselves doing things which would be repugnant and horrifying to any rational person.

Even when no sexual assault is involved, many people end up doing degrading, demeaning things to themselves and others while operating with impaired reasoning processes due to alcohol intoxication. People wake up the morning after the previous night of intoxication only to discover they have done terrible things of which they have either no, or only a foggy, recollection. One does not have to commit criminal acts in order to seriously injure, emotionally and psychologically, others or oneself.

None of the foregoing necessarily touches on the more complex problem of alcoholism. In other words, one does not have to be an alcoholic in order to become involved in the sort of problematic ramifications of alcohol consumption which have been outlined in the foregoing examples of impaired rational thinking and judgment.

Many people who get intoxicated may never, ever do anything injurious to anyone. Whatever impairments of reasoning and reflexes which occur with these people may be just harmlessly amusing. Nonetheless, this is just not so for millions of other human beings.

The nature of spiritually induced intoxication is an entirely different kettle of fish. Although this kind of intoxication also involves a departure from reasoning processes, this is not due to any sort of impairment of rationality or judgment.

In the case of alcohol induced intoxication, there is a sense in which one cannot keep up with the realities and requirements of rationality. On the other hand, in the case of spiritually induced intoxication, the processes of rationality cannot keep up with the realities and requirements of transcendence.

In relation to the condition of spiritual intoxication, rationality actually constitutes a state of diminished capacity. In fact, some Sufi masters liken the condition of rationality to a state of being inebriated with the wine of logic. No matter how good the vintage of this wine may be, it impairs one's spiritual judgment and interferes with mystical understanding.

The practitioners of the Sufi path note, however, that mystical understanding does not interfere with rational processes. Rather, such understanding informs and illuminates those processes.

Mystical understanding helps place rationality in its proper perspective. Mystical understanding shows some of the limitations of rationality.

When one spends time with Sufi masters, the nature of their logic, judgment and reasoning is impeccable. The counsel and advice they give is very practical, logical and down-to-earth.

Inwardly, these people are spiritually intoxicated, but outwardly they are sober. The outer sobriety entails an understanding of the nature of this world and how it works. The inner intoxication entails an understanding of the nature of the spiritual dimension of things and how that affects worldly matters.

Sufi masters use: reason, logic, and rational judgment to help people with their worldly and spiritual problems. Nevertheless, in order to be of help, the reason and logic must be infused with, and oriented by, the realities of spirituality and mystical transcendence.

Rational processes -- in and of themselves -- are not enough. One cannot reason one's way to spiritual truth or wisdom.

Mystical truth and wisdom only can come through mystical experiences and only after these experiences are properly understood. Spiritually induced intoxication is one medium or channel through which such truth and wisdom come.

People who are spiritually intoxicated in the Sufi sense of the term never sexually assault anyone. Those who are in a condition of spiritual intoxication do not abuse their spouses or children. Somebody who is spiritually intoxicated does not get in her or his car and proceed to maim or kill others or herself or himself.

Although there may be certain theologians who would disagree, a person in a state of spiritual intoxication does not do anything to degrade or demean oneself. Moreover, a spiritually intoxicated individual does not sober up later on only to discover some terrible deed or deeds which had been committed while in an intoxicated condition.

At best, a person who becomes intoxicated through the consumption of alcohol may get a certain amount of relaxation and

enjoyment from the experience. There are no deep truths or wisdom which arises out of alcohol intoxication. One is pretty much the same after the experience as one was before it.

Spiritual intoxication brings overwhelming ecstasy and joy. One comes away from the experience with a very different perspective concerning the nature of reality and one's relation with reality. In addition, there are deep truths and wisdom which are communicated during the experience of spiritual intoxication.

Not all conditions of spiritual intoxication are of the same intensity or depth. The vintage of the spiritual wine being imbibed by the individual will make a big difference in the quality and character of the experience of spiritual intoxication. Furthermore, the spiritual level of the individual who goes into a state of ecstasy is also an important factor affecting the intensity and depth of such experiences.

According to Sufi masters, outward manifestations of spiritual intoxication are, under certain circumstances and conditions, perfectly acceptable. Indeed, such mystical states are a sign of God's grace.

Nonetheless, Sufi shaykhs indicate that when an individual is permanently in a state of outwardly manifested intoxication, this condition is problematic as far as making continued spiritual progress is concerned. Such people are, in a sense, transfixed by their overwhelming experiences of spiritual intoxication.

Consequently, they are unlikely to move on to further stages of the mystical path. Their progress is arrested at a particular stage and state. A permanent condition of intoxication sacrifices movement toward the full realization of human potential for the bliss and ecstasy of the on-going condition.

Although such permanently, spiritually intoxicated individuals are harmless and, quite often, are sources of blessings for many who come into contact with them, in their own way, many of these people (but not all) are the alcoholics of the spiritual world. This is so in the following senses.

These people are irresistibly drawn and, in a sense, addicted to the continuously intoxicating experiences with which their spiritual condition is saturated. Moreover, like their worldly alcoholic counterparts, those who permanently are in a condition of outwardly



manifested intoxication frequently lose the capacity to function in a "normal" way in society and the work-a-day world.

Sufi shaykhs recommend travelers of the Sufi path should become outwardly sober, while remaining inwardly spiritually intoxicated. In other words, one needs a foot, so to speak, in both the physical world and the spiritual world in order to be a fully effective human being in both worlds.

Sobriety is expressed through the observance of spiritual etiquette. To be sober in the spiritual sense, one must fulfill one's spiritual duties and obligations on all levels of existence. Nevertheless, one cannot perform these duties properly unless sobriety is underwritten by the truths and wisdom of spiritual intoxication.



## Chapter 77

### Guidance

Many of us want to blaze our own path in life. We are inclined to explore where, when and what we wish. We believe we should think for ourselves.

We assume responsibility for analyzing events according to our methodology and interests. We feel a need to draw our own independent conclusions.

Many of us are predisposed to suppose that purpose, meaning, value, and significance should all be discovered or invented or created by us. This is our way of marking territory, clearing paths, and fashioning a philosophical homestead in the wilderness of raw experience.

This kind of rugged individualism is alright up to a point. However, it cannot take the place of spiritual guidance.

The spiritual wheel has already been invented. There is not only no need to reinvent it, this wheel cannot be generated through human effort irrespective of how intelligent or talented or resourceful we may be.

There is a strong tendency among many people to act as if spirituality can be pieced together into its original wholeness by a perspicacious bit of consumerism. For example, we read books on mysticism and select that which seems to be most useful and important, as if we were going through a bargain bin and could distinguish value from trash.

We go to talks on spirituality or watch television programs on this subject. Along the way, we take in a valued clue here and an interesting possibility there. As a result, we begin to paint a picture of the mystical path.

We proceed like we were accomplished artists who knew all about: spiritual perspective; or, how to make our own mystical pigments from scratch; or, what colors were necessary to give balance and cohesion to the painting. We seem to believe composition and subject matter merely involve letting our imaginations speak their creative truths for all to admire.

We become eclectic in our selections. We seem to believe if one mystical tradition is good, weaving together elements from six or seven traditions has got to be even better.

We are oblivious to the fact that different spiritual traditions are the way they are for a reason. They have a history. They have a context. They often have specific target audiences in mind. They emerged for a purpose, and they may have declined or disappeared for a purpose.

Many of us seem to behave as if we were mystical cardiac specialists working in the emergency room of modernity. We encounter a spiritual tradition which is ancient and, apparently, barely alive, and we believe we have the capacity to resuscitate the nearly moribund patient through sheer skill and will on our part. As a result, we often make the patient suffer through our arrogance and pride.

Some of us tend to be true progeny of our technological age. We have come to the conclusion spiritual traditions of the past need to be up-dated and proceed to do this according to fashion and fancy.

We throw out parts which seem to have no relevance to modern sensitivities. We tack on features which appear to render the tradition consonant with modern knowledge and understanding.

We believe we are pushing back the frontiers of spiritual wisdom. Little do we suspect how right we are.

We have become the sorcerer's apprentice, wreaking havoc and destruction with each new incantation and wave of the wand. In the master's absence, we have got in over our head and have no idea how to stem the tide of rising, turbulent waters.

The practitioners of the Sufi path stipulate very clearly that guidance can only come from God. Guidance is not within the purview of human beings.

Prophets, saints, guides, as well as our own hearts and minds are not the primary source of guidance. God is.

The spiritual personalities who have a guiding function do so much in the way that water is released when sluice gates are raised. As such, the human role in guidance becomes a matter of the structural intricacies of the gating process through which water is channeled and regulated. The modality of release obviously has significance and importance, but the water for which the gate was constructed comes from God, as does the design for, and operation of, that gate.

Shaykhs are the living exemplars who give expression to spiritual guidance which comes from God. In a sense they are mediums of

communication in which the noise to signal ratio has become vanishingly small. At the same time, the signal to noise ratio has become almost pure, if not pure, signal.

Spiritual guides have different multi-channel capacities for handling various dimensions of the Divine signal(s) which come for the benefit of human beings. Nonetheless, whatever spiritual signals come through a particular spiritual capacity is undistorted, clear and pure.

Indeed, a very important part of the guidance which comes through spiritual teachers is to show us how to eliminate the number one source of noise interfering with our hearing Divine communication—namely, the ego. Spiritual guides are valuable resources in this respect because they show what the potential of human beings is when the noise of the ego is removed and only the pure signal of Divinity remains.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, anyone who supposes he or she can storm the bastions of spirituality through her or his own cleverness and talent will be repulsed. Such forays are the work of the ego and are always doomed to failure.

We cannot find truth or understand truth unless God wishes us to do so. We are powerless and defenseless without Divine assistance and support. One of the essential forms of such assistance and support is spiritual guidance.

There are many commodities in society which, because of their value and significance, become the focus of counterfeit operations. Currency, paintings, stamps, sculpture, historical artifacts, and jewels are just a few of the items which some people seek to imitate for their personal gain.

Similarly, spiritual guidance is now, and has been in the past, subject to counterfeit attempts. This is as true for the Sufi mystical path as it has been for other mystical traditions.

Due to the inestimable value and significance which authentic spiritual guidance has for human beings, there always have been those who were interested in exploiting the situation and trying to pass off the false for the real. The people who did this stood to gain money, fame, influence, power and status.

The existence of counterfeit "spirituality" poses a considerable problem for would be seekers. To seek means one has not yet found what one is

seeking. Moreover, the seeker after the mystical path may have only a vague idea of that for which one is looking.

In a very real sense, one only will know precisely what one is looking for after one has arrived at one's spiritual destination. Since the seeker has not arrived, the seeker is not in any position to differentiate counterfeit spirituality from the genuine article. This places one at a distinct disadvantage if, and when, one encounters spiritual con artists.

Caveat emptor (let the buyer beware) seems as good a maxim as any to keep in mind at this point. Although practitioners of the Sufi path have indicated no one can be his or her own mystical guide, nevertheless, this does not mean one has to become brain dead.

God has given to human beings an array of gifts, including reason, logic, judgment, common sense, and reflection. These can be used as tools that can help us sort through certain kinds of information and experience. God also has provided us with a heart through which to listen for -- and detect -- spiritual resonances.

If we weigh matters carefully, if we are sincere in our intentions, if we try to listen to our innermost being, if we seek Divine guidance on the matter, then, God willing, we will be far less likely to be fooled, than if we merely rushed headlong into something in a rather naive, unreflective, imprudent manner.

One's spiritual well-being (as well as one's emotional, mental, physical and financial well-being) may be on the line. Therefore, one ought to have, and give, some care and consideration for that which potentially is being placed at risk.

Unfortunately, on the human side of the equation, there are no guarantees for arriving at correct decisions. Only God can make guarantees stand up. Indeed, this is precisely why finding a legitimate way to place our affairs in the care of Divine guidance becomes so crucial and vital.

## Chapter 78

### Light

Visible light is not the only source of 'illumination' through which objects can be seen or imaged. In fact, visible light is but one expression of a diverse array of such imaging possibilities.

Ultraviolet light, infrared light, x-rays, microwave radiation, radio waves, and "coherent" light, are some of these other possibilities. In a sense, each of the foregoing casts a different kind of light on things. Consequently, each of these expressions of illumination has properties which enable us to see "images" of one sort or another.

Prior to the last hundred and fifty years or so, nobody suspected the treasures of 'visibility' inherent in electromagnetic radiation. Sunlight, moonlight, starlight, lightning, and firelight, of one sort or another, were, for the most part, the sources of illumination known to human beings.

If someone had come along much before the mid-19th century and spoken of forms of illumination other than the known ones, this person likely would have been ridiculed and dismissed by almost everyone, including many, if not all, of the people of science. Then, as now, what people see is, in large part, limited by what their minds permit them to see.

Of course, implicit in the last sentence is the fact we don't just see by means of external sources of illumination. We see by means of internal illumination as well.

We see with the mind's eye. We see by the light of reason. We see through the light of creative imagination. We see through the light of experience and in the light of history.

Moreover, all of these internal kinds of imaging are bathed in the illumination of consciousness. Light shining within light and reflecting off itself like a hall of mirrors.

Just what the nature of the light is which makes any of these internal kinds of imaging possible is not understood. When push comes to shove, we really don't know even how physical light is propagated, and we know even less about the character of these other forms of illumination.

Moreover, these internal lights tend to give very inconsistent and, sometimes, contradictory results. Whether such problematic outcomes are due to "equipment" failure, improper use of the illumination process, or something else, is not always clear.

We make use of these internal forms of light. However, from one moment to the next, we often do not know if we can trust the character of such illumination. There often is an uneasy alliance between need or desire and cautionary discretion.

Given the difficulties surrounding the internal lights with which most of us are somewhat experientially familiar (e.g., reason, logic), to talk about other kinds of internal illumination seems foolish. We might be prepared to talk, within certain limits, about the light of faith, but even here there is tremendous controversy over what, if anything, the light of faith illumines.

Some people say one sees what one wants to see through the light of faith. Others say all one sees through the light of faith is oneself in a mood of hoping. Still others say the light of faith is nothing more than the glow of conviction passing itself off as a searchlight of truth.

According to Sufi masters, within us, there are many kinds of light. In fact, the varieties of internal light are such to render the varied properties of electromagnetic radiation pale by comparison.

Sufi masters speak of the lights of gnosis and of certainty. They speak of the lights of witnessing and of love. They speak of the lights of the Dominion of God's Names and Attributes which shine within us.

Sufi masters indicate the Divine light which comes when the false self vanishes is beyond description. Yet, there is another kind of light, also ineffable, that comes when the true self is realized and one sees by the light of God.

All of these different kinds of spiritual illumination are expressions of the light of faith, just as the different modalities of physical imaging mentioned earlier (i.e., x-rays, ultraviolet light, etc.) are inherent in electromagnetic radiation. However, different forms of the light of faith are generated through different spiritual instruments or centers within us, just as different physical processes are required to serve as sources of various forms of electromagnetic radiation.

For example, certain modes of the light of faith come from the heart. Other kinds of faith-light arise through what is referred to as the



sirr or mystery which, when operating properly, protects the heart from other than the remembrance of God.

The spirit produces light which is different from, but related to, the light of the heart and the sirr. In addition, the kafi (the hidden) and the aqfah (the most hidden) are spiritual potentials within human beings which, under appropriate conditions, can give expression to still other kinds of spiritual light.

Through these various modalities of illumination, realms of creation, and beyond, can be accessed, if God wishes, according to one's capacity to do so. The realms of nasut (earth), malakut (the souls of things), jabrut (angels) and lahut (fixed forms) become visible through the illumination provided by the aforementioned array of spiritual light.

The goal of the Sufi path is not to 'activate', so to speak, these different modes of illumination as ends in themselves. All of this has value because it helps us to work our way toward realizing our full capacity to know, cherish, love, worship and serve God.

Although, by the grace of God, the practitioner of the Sufi path, gradually goes through different states, stations and stages of spiritual illumination, eventually, all of this spiritual light has to be integrated and brought into harmonious balance as a unified whole. If God wishes, then this process of unity becomes a fully realized expression of illumination when the true, essential self of the individual becomes permanently established in God's infinite lights of majesty and beauty.

Some people may consider the foregoing brief overview of the perspective of Sufi masters concerning different kinds of spiritual light, to be rather far-fetched. Such people are in a position somewhat similar to individuals prior to the mid-19th century with respect to the properties inherent in electromagnetic radiation. More specifically, individuals in both instances are ignorant of the possibilities contained in certain dimensions of reality.

For more than a thousand years prior to the discoveries of 19th and 20th century scientists involving electromagnetic radiation, practitioners of the Sufi path were intimately acquainted with different modalities of spiritual light accessible to human beings. These Sufi practitioners had pursued a course of action in relation to seeking an understanding of spiritual light that scientists were later to do with respect to physical

light—namely, they carried out extensive, rigorous, and exacting studies of the phenomena in which they were interested.

If someone were to come to a scientist today and say: "I don't believe x-rays or microwave radiation or radio waves exist", the scientist could recommend a course of study. This curriculum would involve investigation of: certain physical principles; various kinds of demonstration; different experiments; the application of mathematics, and so on.

If this course of study were followed sincerely, diligently and with an open mind, the program probably would lead the skeptical individual to the conclusion that light, along with ultraviolet light, microwaves, and so on, were all forms of electromagnetic radiation. In addition, after completing the course of study, the individual might understand how these forms of electromagnetic radiation were capable, each in its own way, of illuminating different aspects of physical reality.

On the other hand, if the skeptical individual did not follow the prescribed curriculum, but, nonetheless, continued to disbelieve in the existence of various forms of electromagnetic radiation, one could hardly blame the scientist for the failings of the individual. Indeed, the protestations of the skeptical individual who refused to take the steps necessary to dispel the skepticism would seem somewhat ludicrous.

Similarly, if someone comes to a Sufi master and says: "I don't believe in the existence of these modalities of spiritual illumination or light about which you speak", this person also could be given a course of study to follow in order to gain concrete evidence of the existence of different modalities of spiritual light. Once again, however, if the skeptical individual does not follow the prescribed program of study, such a person is hardly in a position to feel justified in rejecting the perspective of the Sufi master concerning spiritual light and illumination.

If one wants to see light, one has to take the trouble both to find out how the light may be seen, as well as to implement whatever steps are required. If one doesn't turn on the light switch, one cannot conclude there is no light.

## Chapter 79

### Gifts

People sometimes get very confused about what they suppose is the nature and purpose of the Sufi path. For instance, some people read a few books purported to be Sufi treatises and often draw, or are misled into drawing, quite distorted conclusions about the character of Sufi mystical practice.

On the basis of these readings, they may get the impression the whole Sufi thing is nothing but a story telling tradition. Seen from this perspective, Sufi masters are considered to be master story tellers.

Moreover, Sufi gatherings are events in which everyone sits around telling these neat stories with a Sufi twist and flavor. Presumably, one becomes a Sufi when one participates in the dissemination of these stories.

Sometimes, Sufi masters do tell stories. However, the telling of stories plays, on the whole, a purely secondary or tertiary role relative to the primary task of realizing the presence of Divinity.

This occurs, God willing, when, among other things, the false self is induced to release its strangle hold on management rights and vacate the spiritual premises. Stories may assist in this process, but they are merely a means to a further end which is quite apart from stories per se.

Another confusion which seeps into people's consciousness in relation to mysticism concerns the issue of spiritual gifts. These gifts are loans from God.

Sometimes these gifts are in the form of various extraordinary powers. For example, among these powers are: healing; seeing the future; witnessing events hundreds and thousands of miles away; reading the Tablet of Fate, as well as writing new entries into that Tablet; breaking the norms or laws which usually govern nature; and telepathic communication (both sending and receiving).

There are certain people who hear about these sort of powers, and they begin to drool with desire to possess such abilities. They want to know where they can sign up.

What these people do not understand is the Sufi path, ultimately, is no more about powers than it is about stories. To be sure, God does grant,

through spiritual gifts, one or more of the foregoing capabilities to certain individuals on the mystical path. Yet, these gifts are, in a sense, incidental to the essence of the mystical quest.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, one could have a whole treasure chest of extraordinary powers and be missing the point of why one steps onto the Sufi path in the first place. The goal is God.

Powers are not the object of the set of spiritual exercises which constitute the Sufi discipline or methodology. The object of these exercises is to neutralize the aspect of self which, among other things, desires anything other than: to know God, to love God, to worship God and to serve God.

Sometimes powers are bestowed on an individual in order to test that person. In effect, the individual is being challenged by Divinity. Which does the person want more: powers or the Beloved?

When the individual gets mesmerized and intoxicated with such powers, they lose their way on the mystical path. Powers, then, become an impenetrable veil between the person and her or his potential for fully realizing the presence of Divinity.

Human beings who get seduced by spiritual powers are cheating themselves. This is so because when the person becomes enamored by extraordinary powers, he or she is sacrificing intimacy with God for what amounts to very subtle ego gratifications.

According to the practitioners of the Sufi path, true happiness, contentment, fulfillment, peace, satisfaction, identity and love can only be realized through spiritual intimacy with God. Powers are powerless to achieve any of this.

Powers, in and of themselves, cannot be used to rise higher spiritually. They have no capacity to do this. On the other hand, refraining from becoming entangled in the seductive allure which powers have for the ego, can help one, God willing, to make significant spiritual progress.

There are many practitioners of the Sufi path who, by the grace of God, have ready access to tremendous powers. However, they often do not utilize them.

Within certain limits, they have the capacity to change things significantly, but, for the most part, they do not. They more or less leave things as they are.

There is something very deep here to which we ought to give considerable reflection.

Having powers, is not the panacea we might suppose it to be. There are other principles which constrain the use of powers and, therefore, transcend them in the scheme of things.

The bestowing of Divine gifts in the form of extraordinary powers is not always a spiritual trial. Some individuals are given such gifts as a tool to be used under certain circumstances in the service of God.

God, in a sense, delegates some degrees of discretionary authority to some of the servants of Divinity. Just as God has granted various people different kinds of talents and intellectual capabilities in order to fulfill certain spiritual tasks, so, too, God gives some people special powers that permit the fulfillment of those kinds of spiritual tasks which require special abilities.

This means some servants of Divinity become loci of manifestation through which powers are released in order to permit the servant to be able to fulfill certain spiritual duties which have been assigned to her or him. For instance, in order for a shaykh to be able to assist a devotee, the teacher must have considerable insight into the spiritual capacity and circumstances of the individual's life.

Consequently, one of the powers given to the shaykh by God is the capacity to read the life of the devotee like an open book. Nothing the individual has done in the past, or is doing or thinking or feeling now, can be concealed from the shaykh's Divinely supported gaze.

On the basis of this kind of understanding, spiritual diseases are diagnosed and appropriate spiritual remedies are prescribed. God has given spiritual masters the special powers which are necessary for this healing work of the soul.

In addition to the foregoing remarks involving one of the legitimate uses of extraordinary powers, one also might consider the following comments. More specifically, sometimes a Sufi master will employ an aspect or dimension of such powers to help strengthen the faith and allay some of the doubts of an initiate of the path.

When an individual witnesses certain events which give expression to a spiritual power, the individual tends to be powerfully affected, if not nonplused, by the occurrence. The ego is in a panic because it has just gone through something which pulls the rug out from beneath a whole set of assumptions about how things are supposed to operate.

The heart, on the other hand, is buoyed and intrigued by such an event. The heart has received some concrete confirmation which can be used in the struggle with the ego's disbelief and skepticism.

As a result, the initiate's faith becomes a little stronger. Some of the doubts begin to dissipate.

However, from the perspective of Sufi masters, there are many reasons a shaykh should not become indulgent in relation to this sort of spiritual disclosure. Among the most important of the reasons for restraint in this regard, concerns the adverse effects on faith that would occur if the initiate were, in the beginning, fed a steady diet of extraordinary events.

Faith grows through struggle and conflict with, among other things, doubt. If one takes this element of struggle away, as would be the case were an initiate exposed to constant spiritual disclosure, the quality of the faith is diminished and weakened.

A spiritual guide must strike a fine balance with respect to the extent of such spiritual disclosures, as well as their timing. The shaykh wants to lend the kind of assistance which will help the person through, say, some rough spots of the path. However, too much of this sort of support at the wrong time can prove injurious to the faith of the individual in the long run.

One should not be concerned about gifts from God. If one seeks God with a specificity of purpose which targets only the fullest realization of Divine presence in our lives for which we have the capacity, gifts will look after themselves.

A person who truly is in love does not spend time wondering what gifts the beloved will bring. All thoughts and anticipations concern only the presence of the beloved. Longing for anything other than the beloved, is to bring into question the sincerity of one's love.

## Chapter 80

### Freedom

Having choice and being free is not necessarily the same thing. Many of the tragedies of our lives are based on the assumption that being free to choose necessarily means we have freedom.

There are, at least, three issues which must be considered when thinking about the relationship between choice and freedom. (1) Who is the one doing the choosing? (2) What is the nature of the process through which choice arises? (3) What is the character of that which is being chosen?

Let us begin with the following example. Suppose someone is a drug addict. Let us further suppose this person is hooked on a wide variety of uppers and downers.

If this individual has money and contacts, a fairly wide assortment of choices are available to the person. There are all different manner of uppers and downers to be bought and consumed, either individually or in imaginative combinations.

Despite the presence of many choices, all of which are realizable, this individual hardly is free. The person's whole life is driven, in one way or another, by drugs.

What one does, with whom one does it, and why one does it, are, for the most part, drug related. How one feels, what one thinks about, the problems one has, and so on, are all heavily influenced by the seeking of drugs, the taking of drugs and the aftermath which is left in the wake of drug consumption.

In order to have choice in one area of life, the addict has surrendered freedom in virtually all other parts of his or her life. On balance, the exercise of choice has entailed very little freedom.

The foregoing scenario can be complicated considerably by changing one of the assumptions. More specifically, let us now assume the individual in question does not have the money with which to purchase the desired drugs.

There are still a wide variety of choices available to such an individual. This person can work extra hours at, say a part-time job. The individual could borrow money. The individual could pawn or sell various

possessions. The person could turn to prostitution of one sort or another. The individual could try to sell some of his or her blood. The person could steal items and convert them into cash through a fence or the black market. The individual could break into pharmacies or try to work some sort of prescription scam.

Once again, there are many avenues of possibility for choice. However, all of these avenues are dictated by one's need for drugs.

Most people, including drug addicts, would prefer not to have the sort of "freedom" entailed by such choices. One is degraded and humiliated as a human being to feel compelled to make these choices.

In fact, in a very real sense, the more choices of this kind one has, the more curtailed is one's opportunity to be a fully functioning human being. One has sacrificed freedom for choices of a limiting nature.

All choice, of course, places constraints on freedom. One cannot do everything. One only has a finite amount of time, energy, and resources available to one. Consequently, doing one thing precludes doing other things.

Nonetheless, there are choices, and there are choices. Some choices are liberating, and some choices close one off to possibility.

Many discussions of freedom take place in a vacuum, as if freedom were something which could be studied independently of the nature of human beings and the character of reality. In fact, one's choices concerning whom, in essence, one believes humans to be will affect one's ideas about freedom. Different theories of freedom follow from different conceptions about the nature of humanity.

From the perspective of Sufi masters, an individual only can be free in a fundamental sense when one realizes one's essential capacity and true identity. All other possibilities, whatever choices they may entail, will ultimately impose on the individual in ways which sacrifice essential freedom on the altar of choice.

Ultimately, when one embraces these kinds of choice, one becomes entangled in constraints and does not experience liberation. One becomes something other than whom one really is.

If one has musical talent, if one can write and play music, if one has the heart and temperament of a musician, and if one derives joy, meaning, purpose and value from music, but one is forced to become something else,



then no matter how many choices may be associated with this other occupation, one will not feel, or be, free. One will only feel free, if one can be what one is: a musician.

Practitioners of the Sufi path maintain we are, in essence, spiritual beings. We have spiritual talent. We have the heart and temperament of spiritual beings. For us, the source of our greatest joy, purpose, meaning and value lies with spirituality.

The Sufi masters indicate we were born for spirituality. We were created for spirituality.

We will not know ourselves until we realize our spiritual identities. We will not fully understand our relationship with reality without the unfolding and maturation of our spiritual dimension. Our uniqueness will be given fullest and richest expression only through spirituality.

When, through choice, we impose on ourselves conditions which thwart or undermine our spiritual potential, we interfere with our freedom to be who -- in essence -- we really are. When other people, through their choice, place obstacles in our way which create problems with respect to the realization of essential, spiritual identity, then freedom is being curtailed, although one may be permitted any number of choices in the trade-off.

Many people get caught up in discussions about freedom of choice. However, the real issue ought to be a matter of the way in which choice either constrains one or liberates one in relation to essential freedom.

To the extent one places emphasis on the importance of extending the range of choice available to an individual, independently of considerations of essential spiritual identity, one will lose sight of what real freedom involves. Extending the range of choices to which a person has access -- just for the sake of having more and more choice -- is primarily of interest to the ego. This is so because the ego has no wish to realize essential identity or to place constraints on choices which permit the individual to be liberated from the ego.

Choice means continued life for the ego, whereas real freedom means the demise of the ego. The ego has a vested interest in expanding the scope of choice and narrowing the opportunities for real freedom to gain prominence as an issue with which choice ought to struggle.

Who is the one doing the choosing? Are our choices an expression of the ego or the true self?

What is the nature of the process through which choices arise? Do spiritual or non-spiritual processes predominate in the coloring, shaping and orienting of choice?

What is the character of that which is being chosen? Is one opting for choice as an end in itself, or is one using choice as a means for establishing an end of essential freedom?

Are we painting ourselves into an existential corner through our choices? Or, are we liberating ourselves through our choices?

Are we committing ourselves to choices which will impose burdens on us? Or, are we committing ourselves to choices which will free us from ourselves?

Is choice, in and of itself, the basis of the utility function which should govern our lives? Or, should the basis of that utility function be rooted in an essential identity which transcends the idea of choice considered in isolation?

The drug addict scenario outlined earlier is merely a prototype for an issue at the heart of the potential conflict between choice and freedom. More specifically, many of the choices we make in life involve addictions of one sort or another.

We can become addicted to: career, fashions, food, sex, fame, power, status, money, possessions, hobbies, leisure past-times, television, music, violence and so on. All of these addictive lifestyles can have many, many choices associated with them. However, these choices are paid for in the currency of our freedom.

When we are addicted to anything, we are not free to be who we really are. The choices of addiction are, ultimately, always about the constraints which, in time, come to be imposed on us by our desires and passions, or by others, or by the situation.

The choices of addiction are never liberating, although, initially, we are deceived to suppose otherwise by the way choice masquerades in the form of freedom. The choices of addiction are always about enslavement to things, processes, circumstances, events and people which compel us and drive us. Therefore, these choices will not, and cannot, lead us to our true identity.

## **Chapter 81**

### **Silsilah**

A silsilah gives expression to the chain of spiritual authority and transmission which links a present day shaykh with all of the spiritual guides preceding that shaykh in the spiritual lineage. People come to belong to the silsilah through taking initiation with the current shaykh.

Initiates do not always appreciate the difficulties, struggles and sacrifices which others have had to endure in order to make their spiritual journey possible. The truth of the matter is, however, there would be no path to step on to if those who came before had not been willing to die to their false selves and become the servants of God.

Moreover, the people of the past who, by the grace of God, were able to complete the spiritual journey and reach their destination did something else besides finish their personal duty to God. They came back to this realm of existence in order to help others reach their spiritual destination as well.

Although the story of every spiritual guide is unique, nonetheless, there are two things which remain fairly constant in each of these stories. First, every shaykh succeeded because he or she had the appropriate kind of support, protection and assistance.

In other words, there are no self-made shaykhs on the Sufi path. If people were supposed to succeed spiritually on their own, silsilahs never would have come in to being, anymore than there would have been a need for a Prophetic tradition.

One's dependence on the lineage of spiritual transmission of the silsilahs and the Prophets is an outer manifestation of one's ultimate dependence on God. This is because the spiritual authority and transmission which come through the silsilah come from nowhere else but God.

The second theme which remains constant in the life stories of the shaykhs is the following. Despite the support and help which is received, every shaykh had to suffer in one way or another.

The suffering which comes from trials, tests, challenges, difficulties and struggles is the food which makes spiritual growth possible. At the same time, the only one who truly knows the nature and extent of the suffering is the spiritual guide of the individual.

Complaining about -- or demonstrations of -- suffering are not in the spirit of the spiritual etiquette of the path. The suffering is to be endured in silence, with acceptance and without regret.

The reasons for this have nothing to do with being "tough" or "macho" or masochistic. Rather, one remains silent because the ego will quickly make a cause célèbre of the suffering in order to entrench its own sense of pride and in order to enhance its public image.

In fact, one needs to remain not only outwardly silent one also needs to remain inwardly silent. To indulge oneself inwardly in this regard is as bad, if not worse, than to do so outwardly.

The reason why carrying on with suffering inwardly may be worse than doing so publicly is due to the following. When problems are driven underground into the darkness and shadows of the false self, the faults become more difficult to detect and deal with.

In addition, if one is not inwardly silent, the ego may begin to congratulate itself on how well it is suffering in silence. Therefore, one is getting rid of one kind of problem (i.e., public complaining) and taking on a more subtle and complex form of the same problem.

The spiritual guide of the individual is aware, of course, of all the foregoing. Through the help and support of the shaykh, then, God willing, these problems do become resolved in time. However, before these problems, as well as many other problems, get resolved, there is much internal struggle, conflict and suffering.

The lessons of: repentance, faith, patience, trust, forbearance, sincerity, gratitude, forgiveness, and love, do not come freely or cheaply. There is a price involved ... a price which not everyone may be willing to pay.

Even with spiritual help, the business of overcoming passion and anger is very difficult. Even with spiritual support, the task of purifying the heart is extremely demanding. Even with the love of the shaykh, the challenge of perfecting the spirit requires a lot of effort and dedication.

If there were not people in every generation who were willing to go through the tribulations of the path, a silsilah would die out. Spiritual continuity in a silsilah is paid for in the suffering and tears, silent though these may be, of those who have been blessed by God.

The shaykhs come back from the spiritual heights for the rest of us because of their love and compassion. They want to do whatever they can to ease the pain and suffering of people who step onto the path.

However, the shaykhs know all too well from their experiences with their own spiritual guide, there is a limit to how much the suffering on the spiritual path can be reduced. If the spiritual guide were to eliminate the suffering altogether, an initiate's opportunities for undergoing spiritual transformation might be compromised.

Like a physician, the Sufi shaykh understands healing comes with pain. Indeed, certain kinds of pain are often an indication healing is going on.

An initiate can never repay the shaykh for the suffering which the latter has undergone in order to give the initiate the chance to realize herself or himself spiritually. Of course, the shaykh really is not looking to be re-paid by anyone. Furthermore, the shaykh would feel uncomfortable if such suffering were to become an issue of discussion.

Nonetheless, while, for the most part, the difficulties undergone by the current shaykh usually are not explored, the suffering of previous shaykhs may be discussed. There may be a variety of reasons for this, but almost all of these reasons have to do, in one way or another, with bringing important spiritual lessons to the attention of initiates.

Every silsilah is filled with accounts of the: heroism, bravery, humility, strength, insight, wisdom, faith, love, compassion, kindness, difficulties, trials, challenges, and so on, of previous spiritual guides of the silsilah. These stories inspire, intrigue, instruct, warn and comfort the initiates of the Sufi path.

These stories often allude to the issue of suffering without necessarily making that the focus. Nonetheless, one should spend some time pondering on this issue of suffering undergone by others which has produced uncountable benefits for people of later generations.

Those individuals have suffered, and through this suffering, other people have been provided with an opportunity for spiritual growth. Consequently, we need to ask ourselves: would we be prepared to suffer in a manner similar to the spiritual guides of a silsilah so that others who come after us may have the same kind of opportunity as that from which we have benefitted? Only the addictive hold which the false self

has over us would prevent us from answering this question in the affirmative.

An initiate can never repay the spiritual guides of the silsilah for what, by the grace of God, has come through them to the initiate. However, the initiate, perhaps, might bring a smile of happiness to the hearts of the shaykhs if the initiate were prepared to struggle in an attempt to show that the efforts of the spiritual guides, on behalf of those who follow, had not been wasted.

## Chapter 82

### Jihad

Spiritual struggle with one's false self or ego is the essence of jihad (struggle). Any other interpretation of this term which is not, first and foremost, rooted in, and does not give priority to, the struggle against the ego, is a distortion of the concept.

Some of us, as a result of the machinations of our egos, want to de-emphasize this theme of internal struggle. Instead, we prefer to redirect the focus of struggle toward armed combat against anyone who does not fit into our conception of whom is a believer and follower of God.

All too frequently, many of us tend to consider anyone to be a non-believer who is not prepared to bow down to the idols we have constructed concerning the nature of how spirituality and religion must be. We become enamored with our own ideas, values and behaviors, fashioning them into golden calves which low to the tune of our likes and dislikes.

We sometimes take our feelings of being enamored with the idols we have constructed, to be signs of God's approval. In reality, these sorts of feelings merely reflect the delusions of our own false selves.

According to Sufi masters, if we properly and sincerely occupied ourselves with what we were sent into this world to do, we would have no time, energy, nor interest to do battle with alleged non-believers external to us. On the one hand, we would be too busy doing battle against the non-believer within ourselves. On the other hand, we would be too preoccupied worshipping, loving and serving God to want to become entangled with hostilities against so-called non-believers.

To be sure, sometimes circumstances are forced upon us, and, consequently, justice requires certain actions be taken in order to struggle against injustice. However, even here, armed resistance or combat is not the first option.

One can struggle against injustice through discussion and education. One can write and speak against injustice. One can organize people within the community or nation to develop constructive programs designed to eliminate or alleviate injustice.

If necessary, one may place one's life on the line in the struggle against injustice.

Nevertheless, willingness to sacrifice one's life does not necessarily entail a readiness to take the life of someone else.

God has equipped us all with instruments which have the potential to defend us against injustice. These instruments do not come in the form of rifles, bombs, tanks, or planes. They come in the form of our minds, hearts and spirits.

Patience, tolerance, forbearance, sincerity, kindness, compassion, spiritual courage, charity, generosity, forgiveness, and love do violence to no one. These not only help avoid conflict, tension, antagonism and hostility, but they also help to resolve situations and bring healing to the lives of those affected by injustice.

Injustice is not just a matter of the moral and spiritual mistakes other people may make in relation to us, it is also a matter of the wrongs we may do to others while we merrily set about pursuing our conception of justice. Unless we are extremely careful, the use of weapons of destruction, even for a just cause, almost always ends up leading to the generation of more injustice than justice.

If innocent people are killed, if various aspects of the environment are destroyed, if the seeds of further animosities are sewn in the process of trying to do justice, how does one balance the terrible realities of the former against the idea of the latter? Furthermore, whose criteria of justice are to be used to balance the scales that are weighing the situation?

If we use a utility function which says the greater good should determine what we do, whose definition of the "greater good" is to shape and orient that utility function? Whichever equation of justice is used, we better hope it offers more wisdom than is reflected in much of human history.

One of the lessons of history is that whenever human beings try to rely on their own sense of justice rather than on a Divine sense of justice, we generate almost nothing but injustice. The matter merely becomes more difficult when we assume that what we believe to be just is the same as what God knows to be just, arguing for the former as if it were the latter, but having no understanding of the difference between the two.



Often times, we are ready to do battle with an external foe in direct proportion to our unwillingness to engage our internal foe. Very frequently, the more we insist the solution to all our problems lies in attacking, subduing or destroying someone else, the more likely will the solution to all our problems lie with overcoming the enemy within us.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, in our impatience to solve our problems through hostility, conflict, aggression, and terrorism, we are demonstrating our lack of knowledge of God. Divinity does not condone violence as the method of choice by which to resolve problems.

The Sufi masters indicate God prefers us, if at all possible, to find gentle and artful ways of dealing with one another, even when in conflict. In the choice between a gentle and a harsh response to an act of injustice, Sufi masters maintain God would wish us to choose the gentle path over the harsh path.

Tolerance is better than intolerance. Forgiveness is better than holding a grudge. Trust is better than mistrust. Patience is better than impatience. Kindness is better than cruelty. Love is better than hatred. Peace is better than hostility.

Intolerance, holding a grudge, mistrust, impatience, cruelty, hatred and hostility all require us to give in to our egos. This is a tremendously easy thing to do.

Tolerance, forgiveness, trust, patience, kindness, love and peace all require us to do battle with our egos. This is a tremendously difficult struggle.

When we give in to our egos, we demonstrate our lack of trust in God. When we give in to our egos, we are saying, in effect, we would rather have our egos, not God, handle our affairs, since God encourages us to seek to oppose whatever the ego desires to do.

When we struggle against our false selves, we are placing our trust in God. In effect, we are saying, God promises Divine support to those who show tolerance, forgiveness, patience, kindness, love and are peaceful. If we trust in God, then we will follow the Divine prescription laid down by God for invoking the Divine support we need.

Sufi masters note that when we decide to trust God, then we ought to do so. If we are going to trust God, then let us not demand God must meet

our schedules and deadlines. Let us allow God time to arrange things in a manner which is spiritually most advantageous to us. If we are going to trust God, then let us do so with the certainty God is totally reliable in assisting those who depend on Divinity. To learn to trust God requires struggle. Trusting in God is contrary to everything the ego holds dear.

The ego continuously will criticize and ridicule every step we take toward trust in God. The ego will generate intense waves of doubt and skepticism in relation to any undertaking of trust in God.

To stand one's spiritual ground and wait out the storm of fear and terror which arises when the ego is faced with trusting in something other than itself, requires great courage and steadfastness. Courage and steadfastness do not come without spiritual struggle.

The Sufi path weaves its way through the day-to-day events of our lives. Consequently, that path is filled with the trials, tests and challenges of everyday life which require us to struggle against our false selves.

If we do not learn to conquer ourselves, then whether we subdue or are subdued by some external enemy becomes a moot point. This is so, because if we do not win the former struggle, then we will be losers no matter how the latter struggle turns out.

Sufi masters are agreed that when we are slaves to ourselves then we remain slaves even when we vanquish others. On the other hand, when, through struggle and the grace of God, we become free within ourselves, we remain free even when we are vanquished by others.

## **Chapter 83**

### **Government**

If we were asked, and sometimes even if we were not asked, about what we believe to be the problem, if any, with the way various public officials go about their duties, most of us would be quite prepared to share our opinions on this matter. We all seem to feel we have some insight to offer about the difference between good and not-so-good government.

Interestingly enough, whatever the accuracy of our perceptions about the political process may be, many of us tend to be oblivious to the quality and character of governmental operations within ourselves. This lack of awareness could be because many of us may not consider what goes on inside of us to be much like a governmental process.

However, the politics which goes on in the external world does not rise ex nihilo. It comes from within us. Indeed, external politics is, in a sense, internal politics writ large.

The characteristics of internal politics are quite similar to properties found in external political processes. For example, there is a need for decision making and the implementation of such decisions. In addition, within us, there are activities which resemble: think-tanks, spin doctors, lobby groups, image consultants, intelligence gathering operations, ethics committees, regulatory agencies, judicial review boards, dirty tricks operations, military forces, legislative bodies, prison systems, and revenue generating enterprises.

All of the foregoing internal processes affect the character and quality of the decisions made by the individual. Moreover, because of the problems and pressures generated by the dynamics of the decision making process, one finds many other features of our inner government which share some common themes with certain aspects of politics.

For instance, many of our internal governments are capable, in various ways and degrees, of: biased agendas; partisan politics; corruption; dereliction of duty; human rights violations; grid-lock; revolution (both peaceful and violent); fraudulent conduct; cover-ups; repressive measures; irresponsible spending programs; breaking promises; and both minor, as well as, major scandals of one sort or another.

Like external governments, our internal governments: make both good and bad decisions.

Similarly, our internal governments, like their external counterparts, get both good and bad advice from a variety of sources.

Again, like external governments, our internal political systems often are involved in crisis management operations. These operations, frequently, are as much a reflection of the problematic way we govern ourselves, than they are an expression of life-problems arising independently of our style of mismanaging our internal government.

When the ego is running our internal government, our affairs are in the hands of a politician exemplifying all of the characteristics we tend to associate with the stereotypical bad politician. Indeed, bad politics on whatever level is, in general, a function of the activities of the ego.

The ego, like many politicians, tends to be very charismatic and polished in public situations. However, at the same time, the ego is ambitious, vain, and arrogant.

The ego knows, as almost any politician does, how to get things accomplished through pushing the right emotional and psychological buttons. In fact, a considerable portion of the resources available to the ego, are expended to gather intelligence about the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the various players in the political game.

In addition, the ego has the gift of gab and is always on the stump making internal political speeches, filled with stirring platitudes, about this and that issue or situation or person. Like its external world twin brother, the ego is forever making solemn promises and undertakings which are rarely kept.

The ego, as either head of the internal government or as leader of the "loyal" opposition, knows how to threaten, cajole, manipulate, flatter, pressure, compromise, bribe, neutralize, and cheat for purposes of political gain. Political gain, however, is not necessarily measured in terms of worthwhile accomplishments.

More often than not, political gain is a matter of doing whatever is required to stay in power or to be able to influence the decision making process in a manner which is favorable to one's interests. The doing of things, whether good or bad, are merely means to the more important issue of securing or maintaining control.

The ego, of course, is not as much in charge of things as it often likes to give the impression is the case. The ego is under constant pressure from a

variety of intense lobbying groups that are extremely demanding, temperamental and fickle. Some of these lobby groups are: jealousy, revenge, malice, prejudice, hostility, lethargy, lust, greed, and desire.

When the ego blunders and commits public relation gaffes in its dealings with the external world, the spin doctors of the ego go to work. Their assignment is to try to make things appear as if what everyone knows is the case is not the case. The spin doctors are incessantly trying to give a take or a slant on things which puts the ego in the best possible light with respect to its intentions, motives, and conduct.

In ways reminiscent of its external, political counterpart, the ego is subject to becoming entangled in bribery, corruption, scandals and kick-backs of one sort or another. For the ego, such things are just unfortunate risks it runs, on occasion, in order to get, or keep, its government up and running.

Like many politicians in the external world, the ego doesn't really care what damage it does to others or to the environment in the pursuit of its political agenda. Compassion, generosity, fairness, kindness, servitude, sincerity, honesty, integrity, justice, equality, rights, freedom and so on are, all too frequently, just empty words which are trotted out every so often to enhance the image and dazzle the suckers.

Nonetheless, the ego understands, as do many politicians in the external world of government, some degree of discretion must be exercised in the implementation of its governmental policies. If one steps on too many toes or ruffles too many feathers, there will be negative, perhaps, embarrassing, political fallout.

Consequently, the ego tends to play a maxima/minima game. The object of this game is to generate strategies which will permit the ego to give up the least for the most return on its efforts. Quite a few rational think-tanks in the employ of the ego are set to work on this task.

In an attempt to establish, at least, the appearance of order and intelligibility within the world of internal politics, the ego sets up: various planning groups; watchdog committees on ethics; regulatory agencies, and assorted judicial bodies. Unfortunately, like its external world Doppelganger: plans are not carried out; violations of the ethical codes are often overlooked; regulations are not enforced, and a great many arbitrary, unjust and inconsistent judgments emerge from the appointed judicial bodies.

The ego's short-term and long-term goal is control along with the perks which come with such power. Everything and everybody else must be accommodated to this program.

One of the biggest fears of the ego in this respect concerns the possibility that the rightful heir to leadership of the internal government should seek to return from the exile to which it is has been banished by the ego. The rightful heir is the spiritual essence of the individual.

The ego has powerful resources and allies on which it can call if there is such an uprising.

The body, emotions, desires and the rational mind can all be employed to suppress any move toward spiritual liberation of the homeland.

Dirty tricks, negative campaigning, disinformation, filibusters, procedural delays, and terror campaigns can all be used by the ego to prevent the rightful heir from returning to the seat of executive power. Moreover, the ego can lead the internal government into an emotional and intellectual gridlock so that nothing gets accomplished and, thereby, the status quo is preserved.

Fiery, impassioned addresses will be given by the ego. In these speeches, numerous charges of censorship, repression, rights abuses, and curtailment of freedoms will be leveled against the spirit and its supporters. The spirit will be painted as a threat against all that is good and right with the present, incumbent government of the ego.

If necessary, steps will be taken to imprison, or lay siege to, the one who would depose the ego. Various deployments of troops, blockades, minefields, and ambushes can be arranged by the ego for these purposes.

Through years of mismanagement, bungling, neglect, short-sightedness, selfishness, and corruption, the ego has done tremendous damage to the spiritual infrastructure and the ecological balance of the internal world. Therefore, a tremendous amount of work is necessary to bring about a reform of government.

There are many frustrations, setbacks, difficulties, and obstacles involved in such a spiritual reclamation project. Many sacrifices will have to be made before the internal government starts operating according to its potential.

This, too, the ego will try to use to its tactical advantage. As with all corrupt governments, there is an inertia and malaise which settles on the land.

The ego has distributed patronage in various forms. Pleasures, ease influence, status and comfort are at risk if the ego loses control.

To resist the flow of things in such a world is extremely hard, dangerous work. It takes a lot of effort.

The ego can offer, in the present, ease, comfort, gratification, diversions, and so on. Alternatively, the spiritual side only can offer a future dream of realizing our essential potential through struggle and sacrifice in the present.

The psychological and emotional advantages all seem to be on the side of the ego. Yet, the spirit has a nobility of cause and purpose which resonates very deeply and powerfully in the halls of internal government.

The call of spirituality has a purity and integrity which is very appealing and alluring. Furthermore, there is a sense of justice, beauty and truth inherent in the call of spirituality which cannot even be remotely simulated by the tawdry, impoverished political style of the ego. The possibility of happiness, peace, satisfaction, contentment and love which are part of the platform on which spirituality runs is very attractive.

Restoring decency, honor, and integrity to internal government is a very complex task. The magnitude of the challenge intimidates many of us.

Many of us believe reforming external government is somewhat easier and more practical than to attempt to reform internal government. We often tend to believe, under the influence of the ego, that the problems of the world are generated, for the most part, by others and not by ourselves.

Consequently, many people direct their efforts, energies, time and resources toward working on the problems of the governments of the external world. In effect, we embark on a quest which is dedicated to get other people to change in certain desirable ways, when we, ourselves, often are not prepared to change in equivalently desirable ways.

However, according to the Sufi masters, this kind of thinking has its priorities confused. We will not be able to reform the

governments of the world until we have reformed our own internal governments. The chaos of the world is but a reflection and projection of the chaos of our internal worlds.

The foregoing priority of the Sufi masters does not mean we have to abandon the external world until after one has completed the task of reforming the internal government. Instead, they suggest we see our interaction with the outside world as opportunities to work toward developing programs, policies and projects which operate in line with, and give expression to, the spiritual principles necessary for the reform, care and maintenance of good internal government.

Acting in accordance with the foregoing dialectic, cannot help but have, if God wishes, positive, constructive ramifications for enhancing the quality of the social and political atmosphere in the external world. The development of better communities and governments in the external world requires that we repair the problems in our spiritual infrastructure. We, then, need to take the benefits which are made possible by these repairs and invest them in, among other things, rebuilding our families and communities through the spiritual lessons learned while reconstructing the infrastructure of our souls.



## **Chapter 84**

### **Integrity**

From the perspective of the Sufi masters, one can have spiritual integrity only when one is fully integrated in the Divine Will. True integration in the Divine Will is possible only through the realization of essential identity.

The realization of essential identity can occur only when all idols have been eliminated from one's life. The jettisoning of all idols can take place only by means of a process of initiation in which God takes one by the hand and guides one along the stages of the mystical path.

The process of initiation can be completed only if one's intention to seek God is purified so that one can become a sincere servant of God. The process of purifying intention can be sustained only through the support of Divine love which is transmitted through states of spiritual intoxication.

The most perfect expression of spiritual intoxication is to be engaged, outwardly and inwardly, in living a life of ibadat (worship) that knowingly reflects, according to one's essential capacity, the beauty and majesty of the Divine Names and Attributes. One can be in a condition of perfectly expressing spiritual intoxication only if one is fully integrated into the Divine Will.

According to the Sufi masters, such a person has spiritual integrity.



## Chapter 85

### Jami'

In order to gain some degree of insight into the nature of being spiritually gathered (jami'), one must understand the quality of being spiritually dispersed. Being gathered is the negation of dispersion. One cannot be present to being gathered until one is absent from dispersion.

Dispersion is an expression of our being veiled from God. Dispersion constitutes a condition of spiritual alienation.

Dispersion begins when we forget our original covenant with God prior to being brought into the world. Dispersion entails a wide spectrum of manifestations of heedlessness with respect to our duties before God.

Dispersion is the sentence of exile we have imposed on ourselves for transgressions against our own spiritual potential. Dispersion is the illness we have contracted through our failure to observe the requirements of spiritual health.

Dispersion is a major symptom of the syndrome from which many of us suffer—namely, sleepwalking through life. Dispersion is a function of the retrograde amnesia we suffer in relation to our true, essential identity.

To be dispersed is to be restless, aimless, drifting, uncommitted, scattered and insincere with respect to spiritual responsibilities. The person suffering from spiritual dispersion feels compelled to be on the move, to be active. However, such activity and movement involves a variety of disparate interests, entanglements, obligations, and inclinations in relation to the world and one's false self.

In all of this activity, one really does not know where one is going or why. One is merely following the call of the ego wherever it may lead one. One is active in an attempt to keep up with the whims, desires, impulses, and interests of the false self.

In dispersion we do not know why we are, rather than not at all. All we know is we have an awareness of existence, and our egos begin to exploit this state of affairs according to the requirements of passion and anger.

The dispersed individual is, at best, inconsistent with respect to spiritual activities such as: prayer; charity (both of one's material wealth as well

as from one's person); remembrance of God; meditation; contemplation; fasting; and, journeying toward God. Moreover, even when one does engage in these sort of spiritual activities, more often than not, one's attention is preoccupied with something else such as: work, family, career, hobbies, possessions, money, food, sex, and so on.

The dispersed individual cannot do justice to herself or himself, nor can the dispersed person do justice to others, creation or God. Justice only can be done when one is a spiritually conscious, purified and realized locus of manifestation of God's irada or will. Dispersion is the antithesis of all of this.

The dispersed person is exceedingly vulnerable to the enticements and seductions of habits, passions, anger, Satan, and the world. There is no, or little, spiritual strength to resist such overtures.

The heart of the dispersed individual is ready to be prostituted to any number of whims, desires and fancies which come along, whether from within or without. All that remains to be done is the haggling over the price to be charged for this prostitution of self.

The life of the spiritually dispersed person is marked by various combinations and proportions of: instability, enmity, ingratitude, self-absorption, narrowness, irritability, pride, arrogance, ignorance, injustice, oppression (of self and others), doubt, shamelessness, loneliness, impatience, insensitivity, intolerance, stubbornness, rebellion, being hard-hearted, and cruelty. The spiritually dispersed individual corrupts and despoils the Divine gifts of: time, being, consciousness, will, power, hearing, seeing, essential capacity and speech.

The spiritually dispersed person is present to his or her false self and absent from one's true self. The dispersed individual is present to the world and absent from God.

The spiritually dispersed person is convinced dispersion is the natural and inescapable order of life. The dispersed individual has failed to understand that the potential for being spiritual gathered is an essential aspect of one's identity. Furthermore, the spiritually dispersed person does not understand that the challenge of life involves the struggle to realize one's essential identity in the face of a variety of forces of dispersion.

Our capacity for being spiritually gathered is somewhat like a laser (light amplification through the stimulation of emitted radiation). The laser is constructed so that once light is admitted into this instrument, a series of steps is set in motion to contain the light long enough for all of the photons which make up the admitted light to be organized in a coherent fashion. Coherency refers to a condition in which all of the phase signatures of the photons are synchronized with one another and, therefore, act in concert with each other.

When the emitted light or radiation becomes stimulated and amplified in the foregoing manner, the coherent or unified light released by the laser is able to accomplish many things which ordinary, incoherent light cannot do. For instance, laser treated light can be used to: perform surgery; improve communication by generating clearer, longer lasting signals; enhance accuracy of measurements; provide better security systems; make holographic image and memory systems; increase the sensitivity of various kinds of instrumentation, and so on.

Like the physical laser, the inner, spiritual structure, so to speak, of the individual contains a variety of mirror-like instruments. When these inner instruments are operating and organized properly, they are capable of preventing spiritual light (nur) from being dispersed or lost.

However, unlike the physical laser, the spiritual laser does not organize the nur or spiritual light into a coherent form. Nur is inherently coherent.

The spiritual instrumentation within us is, first, calibrated by nur. Once these instruments are synchronized with spiritual light, the instruments use the properties of nur to entrain our consciousness, attitudes, intentions and understanding.

The entraining qualities of spiritual light or nur might be considered to be somewhat comparable to a complex phase signature. In order for us to have spiritual coherency or be spiritually gathered, everything within us must be in phase-step, as it were, with the nur which is emitted into the interior of our spiritual instrumentation.

In a sense, the spiritual laser reverses the way a physical laser operates. The latter uses a variety of processes inside the laser to organize

light into coherent patterns which have different beneficial functions in the external world.

On the other hand, the spiritual laser uses nur to organize our interior instrumentation to generate coherent patterns of awareness, understanding and so on. These coherent, or gathered, packages are used, subsequently, to perform various tasks in our everyday lives.

In a physical laser, light is amplified through the stimulations of that emitted radiation. The nature of these stimulations will be a function of the character of the laser being used.

In a spiritual laser, the "light" of our awareness and understanding is amplified through becoming entrained by, and, therefore, one with, the inherent coherency of the spiritual light emitted into the interior of our spiritual instrumentation. The nature of the "radiation" released by our instruments after entrainment depends on the character or capacity of our spiritual instrumentation.

Just as the purity of the crystals and the condition of the mirrors used in a physical laser can affect the quality of the light generated by such a laser, the issue of purity and the condition of our spiritual mirrors also affects the quality of the light generated through our spiritual "laser". This means, among other things, that the spiritual condition of our heart is of primary importance in the generation of coherent or gathered spiritual focus and activity.

Like its physical counterpart, the spiritual laser is capable of being used, God willing, to accomplish tasks which otherwise would not be possible under normal, incoherent, dispersed conditions of consciousness, intention and understanding. Enhanced systems of Divine and interpersonal communication, precision spiritual and psychological healing techniques, increased sensitivity to environmental (internal and external) circumstances, more accurate readings of reality, greater spiritual security, and so on, are a few of the many benefits which become possible when our spiritual laser capabilities come, so to speak, on-line.

The spiritual light of the gathered individual is not dispersed, corrupted or lost when engaging the circumstances of the life of this world. The spiritual light of the gathered individual reflects only the Reality of the Source of such light.

All forms, events, effects, causes, processes, phenomena and manifestations are seen through the coherency and purity -- or condition of being gathered -- of Divine light. Gathered light disperses neither left nor right, but stays concentrated on the beauty and majesty of Divinity.

The life of the spiritually gathered person radiates: peace, dynamic stability, harmony, balance, justice, intimacy, love, commitment, gratitude, patience, sincerity, generosity, humility, self-sacrifice, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. In the life of one whom is spiritually gathered, the Divine gifts of: time, being, consciousness, choice, essential capacity, power, hearing, seeing and speech are utilized in accordance with Divine will. As a result, the unique purpose for which such a life has been created is fully realized.

The spiritually gathered individual is absent from the false self but present to the true self. The spiritually gathered person is absent from the world but is present to God being manifested through one's essential self and all of creation.





## Chapter 86

### Prayer

Prayer has its roots in pre-eternity when the fixed forms of nonexistence called out to God to be given created existence. Prayer permeates the realm of spirits in pre-eternity when they responded positively to God's inquiry as to whether or not the spirits acknowledged God as their Lord.

The sound of prayers praising God comes from every corner of created existence— from the smallest sub-atomic particle and even smaller, to the universe and beyond. Every manner of created being has its own unique mode of prayer.

Angels were engaged in prayer before human beings came into created existence. Indeed, there are some angels so engrossed in prayers of praise and glorification of God they are not aware human beings have been created.

Prayer was on the lips of Adam (peace be upon him) when he sought God's forgiveness for his transgression. Prayers seeking Divine guidance, support, deliverance, protection, favor, mercy and compassion have issued forth from the lips of all one hundred and twenty-four thousand Prophets and their communities who followed after Adam (peace be upon him).

Saints and ordinary people alike engage in prayer. Each praises God, or seeks from Divinity, according to her or his spiritual understanding, condition, intention and circumstances.

If one sincerely has faith in the reality of prayer, every manner of prayer raises one up to God. If one is absent to oneself in prayer, one becomes present to God.

Some prayers petition God for the satisfaction of material desires. Other prayers seek intercession on behalf of the poor, the sick, the homeless, the lost, the abused, and the wayward.

There are prayers for forgiveness and prayers of thanksgiving. There are prayers of loneliness and prayers of desperation.

Some people pray and ask: "Why?". Others pray and submit without knowing why. There are prayers of separation. There are prayers of union.

Some people pray with certainty. Others pray with doubts and questions. There are prayers of the true self. There are prayers of the false self.

Some individuals pray frequently. Others may pray only a few times in their lives.

Prayers are silent and voiced, hymned and chanted. Prayers come standing, sitting, kneeling, lying down and in prostration.

On the Sufi path, different prayers may emerge from different spiritual stations. For example, the prayers of those whom are going through the station of patience may be different from the prayers of those whom are in the station of patience. Alternatively, the prayers of those whom are wayfaring through the station of longing may be different from those who are in the station of gratitude.

The mind prays in one way. The heart prays in, yet, another way. The spirit prays in still another way, and so on.

Each aspect of our being has its own modality of praying. However, the best prayer is when all of these are combined together in a harmonious and united manner. In other words, one's prayer should be with one's whole, body, mind, soul, heart, spirit and essential capacity.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, we should seek to pray with sincerity and for sincerity. Moreover, we should pray out of humility.

We should pray with the realization we are impoverished and have no resources of our own. We are dependent totally on God's mercy.

We should pray with the understanding there is no power or protection except through God. If we lack such an understanding, we should pray to God to remove our pride and arrogance.

Sufi masters indicate an individual should pray with tears of longing and gratitude and joy and repentance. If we cannot pray in this way, then we should seek this blessing from God.

In addition, we should pray out of renunciation of the world. In other words, all of our prayers should be out of love for, service to, and the pleasure of God.

From the perspective of the Sufi masters, we should pray without ceasing. Our lives should become prayer.

Our prayers should be done with the understanding that God is the trustee of all our affairs. Furthermore, God is the One Who -- again and again and again -- gives to us independently of whether we have done anything to earn or merit that for which we pray.

Sufi masters maintain we should be constantly seeking the welfare of our parents. Moreover, we should pray for others to receive what we are seeking for ourselves.

We should pray for both believers and non-believers. We should pray to be free of passing judgment on others.

Practitioners of the Sufi path indicate we should pray for the spirits of those who have passed before us. Furthermore, we should pray for the spirits of those who will come after us.

We should pray for the spiritual and material well-being of our families and the members of the community. We should pray for the well-being of the people of all nations and for the well-being of all creation.

Sufi masters indicate we should pray for God to enable us not to waste the precious gift of time. We should pray that, God willing, we do not squander our opportunity to realize our true identity. We should pray to fulfill the purpose of our life.

We should pray for God to show us things as they really are. We should seek release from all our illusions, delusions and spiritual veils.

According to practitioners of the Sufi path, we should pray that whatever enemies we may have become the friends of God. For, if they become the friends of God, then, God willing, they may become a source of blessings for all of humanity, including us.

We should pray our hearts become purified. We should pray our spirits become perfected.

Sufi masters advocate praying to God. They recommend this so that we might be allowed to overcome our spiritual weakness, rebelliousness, forgetfulness, and heedlessness. Furthermore, we should pray for God to forgive us our transgressions of omission and commission, both in relation to those transgressions of which we are aware as well as to those of which we are not aware.

We should pray for God to increase us in remembrance of Divinity. Moreover, we should pray for God to color us with the lights of Divinity.

The masters of the Sufi way urge us to never stop praying to God. We should never despair of God's mercy and generosity.

On the other hand, we should pray to God for patience while our affairs are being arranged in accordance with Divine will. We also should pray to God for submission and acceptance with respect to the Divine disposition of our affairs.

According to Sufi masters, we should pray that God fills our being with love of Divinity. Furthermore, we should pray that God permits us to express our love by, among other things, fulfilling our duties of care in relation to creation.

We should pray to God for us to become instruments of justice and not injustice. In addition, we should pray to God that we live a life of spiritual nobility and not ignominy.

Sufi masters encourage us to pray for God to increase us in levels of faith and spiritual understanding. Also, we should pray to God to be permitted to learn how to embrace sacrifice as a way of life so that we may, God willing, act in accordance with our spiritual understanding.

We should pray for God to teach us how to derive spiritual benefit from the trials and difficulties of our lives. Moreover, we should pray to God with gratitude for the countless blessings which have been conferred on us throughout our lives.

We should pray we come to worship and cherish God with every dimension of our being. In addition, we should pray that we return to our spiritual origins, both pleased with, and pleasing to, God.

The Sufi master of all Sufi masters has said we should pray to God as if we could see the Divine. However, even if we are not able to achieve this level of prayer, nonetheless, we should pray with the certainty that God sees us.



## Chapter 87

### Friend

At best, we have only one friend, who comes to us in many guises. At worst, we have no friend, because we refuse to recognize what lies behind the guises through which Divinity is manifested to us.

From the moment of our conception, our Friend is with us. Our Friend is the One Who, even before our birth, orchestrated the events which brought our mothers and fathers together and led to our conception, knowing this would be the result.

In this way we were given, through the womb of our mothers, a roof over our head and food to eat and a place to sleep before setting one foot on the face of the Earth. Our Friend provided these accommodations for us from the treasury of Divine Names and Attributes.

Our Friend gave us existence and, then, life. Our Friend clothed us with being, consciousness, will, light, hearing, seeing and speech. All of these were drawn from the Divine wardrobe.

Our bodies and minds and hearts were constantly nourished and given loving attention by our Friend all through our years of development. Whatever benefits we received from our parents, families, communities, teachers, playmates and schoolmates were all from our Friend. These people were but the loci of manifestation through which Our Friend acted.

To whatever extent we can think clearly and insightfully, this is a kindness from our Friend. Whatever talents and capacities we have is because our Friend wished for us to have them.

Whenever we were lonely or sick or in pain, our Friend was there listening to us, sending consolations of different kinds, through various mediums, with which to comfort us. From time to time, our Friend sent us care packages of laughter and happiness and people with whom to share our difficulties.

Our Friend would give us sleep so we could rest from the worries and problems of the world. Our Friend provided us with mountains, plains, forests, rivers, lakes and oceans to give rest to our senses and minds. All of this came from the palette of Divine Creation and gives expression to the richness, generosity and subtlety of the care our Friend took to provide for us.

Jobs, clothes, dwellings, health, opportunities, spouses, children, and gifts all came to us from our Friend. We received these not because we deserved them but because our Friend befriended us, and this is how friends are.

Our Friend loves to see smiles on our faces and cries when we shed tears. We cannot go through difficulty without our Friend being more concerned for our welfare than we are.

The breeze which touches our face and feels refreshing is a caress from our Friend. The embrace of warmth from the Sun is by our Friend. The companionship of the moon at night is from the escort service of our Friend.

The rustling of leaves, the warbling of birds, the sounds of water are all instruments in our Friends musical ensemble which performs for our listening enjoyment. Our Friend is in the rhythms and melodies we hear. Our Friend is in the hearing itself.

The atoms of air which weigh down on us and provide us with the very breath of our life move to the command of our Friend. The blood which courses through us and both brings nourishment as well as carries away waste moves with a tempo set by our Friend in our physical hearts.

The biological intricacies, harmonies and order which regulate our lives are all conducted by our Friend. The phenomenal precision and sophistication of our brains are conceived and implemented by our Friend.

Our Friend is within us. If we reflect carefully, we can catch traces of the presence of our Friend amidst our thoughts. The fabric of our consciousness is woven from thread spun from the Divine loom.

The conscience which encourages us and constrains us to be decent, honorable, kind, and just individuals gives expression to inspirations from our Friend. The inclination of our hearts toward compassion, mercy and spiritual knowledge is at the behest of our Friend.

The One who has shaped and crafted our spirits with the potential for spiritual intimacy and love is our Friend. The One who has put longing in our hearts to return to our spiritual origins is our Friend.

The mystical path with its Prophets and saints are courtesy of our Friend. The experiences we have on our spiritual journey are none other than signs of our Friend.



The stations we go through are lessons taught to us by our Friend. The spiritual knowledge and understanding which are gained are the colors and lights which glow with our Friend's nearness.

Our essential capacity and identity bear the signet of our Friend. The very mystery at our core is breathed into us by our Friend.

The One who keeps calling to us to listen is our Friend. The One Who waits for us patiently is our Friend. The One Who forgives us for our foolishness and rebellion is our Friend.

The One Who always loves us despite our many faults and shortcomings is our Friend. The One Who cherishes us and desires nothing but our well-being is our Friend.

Our Friend is found both without us, as well as, within us. However, the greatest potential for realizing the closeness of our Friend is within.

To come face to face with our Friend, requires effort, time and guidance. Guides have been provided by our Friend to help us learn how to struggle and how to make the best use of our time.

Sufi masters are the closest we will come to dealing directly with our Friend until we fully realize that sacred and sublime Presence within ourselves. Sufi masters are the spiritual consolation and support which are provided by our Friend until the face-to-face meeting can take place.

Our Friend is present in the Sufi masters in a very special way. These shaykhs of the path give off the light and love of our Friend. Through them, our Friend transforms us spiritually. These spiritual guides are the 'Philosopher's Stone' with which our Friend wishes us to associate and, thereby, benefit from the spiritual, alchemical properties which have been infused into them by our Friend.

When we are in the company of the shaykh, we are in close association with our Friend. When the Sufi master provides guidance, it is guidance from our Friend. When our spiritual guide shows us love, kindness, generosity, and forbearance, this is being offered from our Friend through the spiritual master.

The being of the shaykh is saturated in the perfume of Our Friend. Because the shaykh is sitting with our Friend, we sit with our Friend when we sit with the shaykh.

The memory of the shaykh which we carry in our minds and hearts is a reflection of our Friend. The love we bear for the shaykh is our love for our Friend in the form of manifestation of our shaykh.

The shaykh and our Friend are not two. The former is one of the modes of appearance of the latter. The shaykh is our Friend in human disguise.

In fact, from the time our souls were placed in our bodies, our Friend has been visiting with us through all the circumstances of our lives. All of our experience is a reflection of our Friend in some disguise or another.

Except for people such as the Sufi masters, most of us do not recognize the presence of our Friend in the events of our lives. Most of us have removed our Friend from our lives and, as a result, have impoverished ourselves spiritually. Consequently, we have become lonely, alienated, adrift, separated and Friendless.

Nevertheless, our Friend still hopes we will clue in to what is actually going on in our lives. Our Friend keeps leaving messages for us to call back, but we persist in deleting the overtures.

The Sufi masters are here to advise us against this and to tell us about the advantages of starting to pick up on the messages being left for us. In fact, the shaykhs are trying to tell us we don't have to be restricted to the limited and indirect properties of message systems. Instead, we should develop our capacity for direct dialing access to our Friend.

## Chapter 88

### Science

The general impression of many people not involved with the Sufi path is that mysticism is far removed from the sort of rigorous methodology which characterizes modern science. In point of fact, this impression is completely wrong.

Descriptions of modern science tend to vary somewhat from person to person. This descriptive variance is true even within the sciences.

Nonetheless, there are certain basic themes which usually are entailed in all of these descriptions, irrespective of whatever other differences there may be in such descriptions. These core currents in the scientific process are probably seven in number:

- (1) science is rooted in empirical observation;
- (2) an emphasis on instrumentality, both for purposes of the detection and measurement of various phenomena;
- (3) the central role of recursive methodology;
- (4) the need for objectivity;
- (5) the issue of consensus among a community of knowers;
- (6) the requirement of replication;
- (7) the desirability of prediction.

All of the foregoing elements are present in the Sufi mystical path. The discussion which follows is merely an overview of what is meant by the foregoing methodological principles in the context of the Sufi science of mysticism.

The empirical roots of the Sufi path come in many forms. Not only do the normal, external sensory channels provide empirical data, there are internal channels of empirical data as well.

Dreams, hal (mystical states), maqam (spiritual stations), Kashf (mystical unveilings), and ilham (flashes of Divine intuition) also provide infinite sources of empirical data. Furthermore, these internal sources of empirical data come in different manifested forms of intensity and certainty.

As is true in the case of modern sciences, there is a considerable difference between the empirical character of the reports of a trained observer and the reports of an untrained individual. For example, not everyone who looks at an X-ray or who examines a photograph of the traces of a sub-atomic event can correctly interpret this empirical data. Similarly, not everyone who undergoes a mystical dream, state, station or unveiling is able to understand, correctly, the empirical data to which such experiences give expression.

The Sufi path provides an intense program of training its adherents to be competent, exacting, empirical observers. The intensity and rigor of such a program rivals -- if not exceeds -- anything which modern science offers in the way of training its observers.

Modern science employs a variety of instruments in its pursuit of understanding. On the one hand, there are what might be termed "natural" instruments such as logic, reason, and mathematics. On the other hand, there are different kinds of external apparatus or instruments used in the detection and measurement of various phenomena.

The Sufi mystical path employs, as well, a variety of instruments. In addition to the instrumental capabilities of the mind (e.g., logic, reasoning) which mysticism shares in common with modern science, there also are other instruments available to the mystic quest for understanding.

According to Sufi masters, the heart (the spiritual entity, not the physical object) is the locus of gnosis. This provides a direct, conceptually unmediated engagement of different dimensions of Divine reality.

Another instrument spoken of by Sufi masters is the *sirr* or mystery. The *sirr* is said to be the locus of spiritual witnessing with respect to whatever God may disclose to the individual.

A fourth modality of instrumentation comes through the *ruh* or spirit. Sufi masters describe the spirit as being the locus of love for Divinity. The love of the spirit enables the individual to experience, know and understand life, identity and one's relationship with Divinity in a manner which is different from, but supplemental to, the other spiritual instruments of mind, heart and *sirr*.

A further instrument of the Sufi path is referred to as the *kafi* or hidden. The *kafi* is described as being the locus of manifestation for the

spiritual illumination, wisdom, knowledge and understanding which comes through encounters with the Divine lights and colors of a certain realm of God's Dominion.

Beyond the Kafi, there is further potential for spiritual instrumentation capable of engaging still further dimensions of Reality. These concern certain modalities of Divine mysteries and secrets which are breathed into the essential capacity of human beings from the Spirit of God.

The instruments of modern science must all be calibrated to be of value. This also is the case on the Sufi path. Mystical instruments, like their physical counterparts, only produce reliable results after a process of calibration in which a variety of instrument adjustments are necessary to eliminate various sources of distortion and inconsistent readings.

Modern science employs a recursive methodology which entails a series of repetitive steps that, hopefully, permits one, to come closer and closer to the true character of some aspect of reality being encountered through experience. In effect, one feeds the results from one cycle of repetitive, methodological steps back into the next cycle of such steps in order to generate improved accuracy, understanding, and so on, over time.

On the Sufi path, recursive methodology plays a key role. One starts out by, if God wishes, cleansing, balancing and transforming the ego or false self through repetitive cycles of prayer, fasting, charity and so on. This constitutes the first set of repetitive steps.

One takes the results from the first application of recursive methodology concerning the ego and proceeds, God willing, to purify the heart through zikr or remembrance of God. This is a second cycle of repetitive steps which builds on the accomplishments of the first cycle.

The next set of repetitive steps involves the sirr or mystery. If God wishes, through a process referred to, by Sufi masters, as emptying the sirr of other than God, the understanding of the individual is further supplemented and complemented.

A further cycle of the process of recursive methodology is encountered when, God willing, the spirit undergoes the perfection of its spiritual potential. Once again, the application of recursive methodology

through the process of perfecting the spirit brings the individual, by the grace of God, to a deeper, fuller, richer understanding of different dimensions of the reality of Being.

To be objective, one needs to eliminate as many sources of bias, prejudice, distortion and error as is possible. The search for truth must be freed from all forces which would compromise the integrity of that search.

Sufi masters outline two major expressions of objectivity on the mystical path. The first concerns the condition known as "fana".

Fana occurs when the false self dissolves before the Presence of Divinity. Since the false self is a major source of error and distortion, the condition of fana enhances the degree of objectivity in one's engagement of Reality.

The second source of objectivity on the Sufi path comes through the spiritual condition of "baqa". This condition occurs when the true self and essential capacity of the individual become established.

In a sense, baqa is a spiritual version of an unobtrusive measure. In baqa one sees by the vision of God and one hears by the hearing of God, and so on. Consequently, there is nothing which one does which intrudes into the engagement of experience and distorts the nature of that experience.

There is a limiting factor in the foregoing which is a function of the spiritual capacity of the individual. One cannot experience or know more than one has the capacity to experience and know.

Spiritual capacity, however, does not distort or introduce error. Whatever is experienced is true and real as far as it goes. On the other hand, the spiritual experience, knowledge and understanding made possible, by the grace of God, through the full realization of one's spiritual capacity do not exhaust what can be experienced, known or understood with respect to Divine realities.

The community of knowers in modern science plays an important role in considerations of methodology and evaluation. The community of knowers establishes the parameters of agreement and permitted disagreement within which the process of science is to be conducted.

There is a similar community of knowers in the Sufi mystical tradition. Unlike modern science, however, the essence of what is agreed upon by

the mystical community of knowers has not changed since the inception of such a community.

The Sufi mystical community of knowers consists of all the Sufi masters of the path, both present and past. All of these masters are in agreement concerning the structural character of human beings and what is necessary to work toward the full realization of the essential, spiritual nature and capacity of the human being.

Sufi masters do not always share the same understanding in all matters. Like their counterparts in the community of knowers in modern science, not all Sufi masters are equal in spiritual capacity.

Nevertheless, irrespective of whatever differences in spiritual capacity exist among Sufi masters, none of this affects the agreement about the general character of what constitutes spiritual progress on the path. One goes from: seeking, to finding, to gnosis of, to loving, to fana, and, finally, to unity in Divinity.

Different people may experience these stages in self-similar rather than self-same ways. However, the essence of Oneness remains in the midst of these differences.

The issue of replication is at the heart of modern science. If the results of a research project cannot be repeated by other investigators, the original research cannot be confirmed and, therefore, lacks scientific credibility and reliability.

The procedures for setting up and carrying out a given line of inquiry must be clearly stated. This is necessary so that any qualified and competent researcher can follow those procedures and produce a result which reflects, within certain allowable limits of difference, the outcome of the original research.

The process of replication is also central to the Sufi mystical path. Indeed, the nature of the mystical path is itself the process of replication which clearly has been described by all competent and qualified spiritual researchers who have preceded one on that path.

If one follows the procedures and methods indicated, then, God willing, one will arrive at the same sort of outcome and conclusions as did the original researchers. These results are expressions of universal laws concerning the inherent nature of the relationship between human beings and Divinity.

Finally, although not all sciences exhibit the capacity to predict, on the basis of known principles, how certain phenomena will unfold over time, mystical science does have this capability. However, for a variety of reasons, Sufi masters often will not indulge others or themselves with public exhibitions of their God given gifts to predict how events will unfold.

There are many well documented accounts of the ability of Sufi masters and Sufi saints to tell what will happen before a given event manifests itself in the physical world. There are also well known accounts of the ability, by the grace of God, of various practitioners of the Sufi path to be able to describe, and, subsequently, have corroborated, what is going on, simultaneously, at considerable distance from them.

Above and beyond such favors of God, there is a precision to the predictive understanding which Sufi masters have concerning the effect on the individual of different spiritual practices, or lack thereof. This understanding comes from the light of God and allows the Sufi master to be able to guide initiates along the mystical path, with precision, as a result of that understanding.

According to Sufi masters, there are different levels of reality. The lowest realm concerns the world of corporeal bodies. This is known as Nasut.

Next, is the realm of the souls of all created things. This is the level of Malakut.

Beyond this is the realm of Jabrut. This level concerns the Attributes of Divinity.

After the realm of Jabrut, is the level of Lahut. This concerns the fixed forms of non-existence which, if God wishes, are given reflected existence through the Divine command of creation: "Kun! (Be)".

Beyond the realm of Lahut, is Hahut. This is the Divine Essence which makes all the other levels possible.

For the most part, modern science only explores the lowest realm of existence—namely, Nasut, which is the realm of corporeal bodies. Modern physical science, unlike mystical science, has no capacity to explore any of the other realms of Being.

Unfortunately, all too many physical scientists rationalize the foregoing limitation by dismissing the other realms as being irrelevant to the



process of science. Mystical scientists (i.e., Sufi masters) indicate that, in very fundamental ways, such realms are not irrelevant to the process of science.

In fact, according to practitioners of the Sufi path, the very first act one must perform in order to seek the truth is to cleanse and purify the self. As such, science, of whatever kind, is, in essence, a moral and spiritual activity.

Scientific methodology has value and appeal precisely because, among other things, it gives expression to a way of trying to preserve the integrity of the scientific process and protect the results of that process from being compromised and rendered unreliable. Mystical science pursues the value and appeal of such methodology to its furthest limits of possibility.



## **Chapter 89**

### **Alhamdulillah**

All praise belongs to God. This seems to be a very easy precept to understand, but, in practice, it is a perspective which is frequently, if not, usually, misunderstood and forgotten.

Of course, from time to time, we may pause to give praise to God, and some of the time we may even, however briefly, mean it. Nonetheless, the nature of the ego is such that we really don't like sharing the spotlight with God, let alone acknowledge that God, and God alone, is behind every manner of event or process to which praise should be accorded.

Much of the world's activities are built around ideas of: winners and losers; elites and commoners; rich and poor; talented and untalented; intelligent and unintelligent; leaders and followers; movers and shakers or the moved and the shaken; insiders and outsiders; the beautiful and the ugly; successes and failures; competence and incompetence; the chosen and the cast-out. The list could be extended.

People who, for example, are talented, intelligent, competent, successful leaders often feel they deserve whatever rewards and kudos come to them. After all, isn't this merely a matter of cause and effect in which the superior being asserts himself or herself and reaps the benefits of that superiority.

If someone were to suggest that we all - no matter what our standing in life, are merely role players -and, perhaps, not even that (see below) - in a cosmic passion play in which the role associated with our being is less important than our understanding of how that role fits into the overall scheme of things, many people might begin to feel a little uncomfortable. This is so, because the foregoing orientation would seem to diminish, if not nullify altogether, all of our "accomplishments" in life.

Many people root their identities in what, supposedly, their accomplishments tell the world and themselves about the sort of people they are and from what kind of cloth they are cut. Consequently, the idea we are not the ones who are really responsible for our accomplishments, becomes very threatening and disorienting.

In fact, in the passion play of life, not only is it the case that we are not the architects of our successes, it is also the case that not everything

means what conventional wisdom supposes things to mean. The passion play is also a mystery.

In such a passion play, "success" does not necessarily mean success and "failure" does not necessarily mean one has failed. In such a passion play, there may be an inversion of what we take to be the meaning of events such that, for instance: riches, sometimes, may really signify impoverishment; or, that which is considered to be beautiful actually may be, under certain circumstances, ugly.

In such a passion play, the meaning of things is a function of the intentions and purposes of Central Casting. Moreover, such meaning is not a matter of the values which we may arbitrarily assign to the roles we play.

We do not earn our talent or intelligence or beauty or wealth or power or success. These are assigned to us, much as an actor is given a costume to wear.

However, in the passion play of life, we are not really even actors. We are more like the rack on which the costume is hung while waiting for the actor or actress to perform at the appropriate time.

In any event, if an actress or actor in a movie began to believe that she or he was the role being played, we might think this to be indicative of a mental illness of some sort. On the other hand, because most of us suffer from deep spiritual illnesses, we do not consider our identification with the roles assigned to us in the play of life to be aberrant. Yet, in reality, as indicated above, we are not even the costumes worn by the actors and actresses in the play, let alone the players.

Moreover, the qualities associated with those assigned roles—qualities such as intelligence, wealth, beauty, success, and so on, are all props which will revert to the Prop Master at the conclusion of the play. They do not belong to us.

The qualities are all borrowed. They are all part of the process of creating the illusions of life's passion-play.

If the script, roles, costumes, special effects, lighting, and so on of life are all the work of some other order or level of reality, then accepting credit for any of this seems rather fraudulent. Yet, whenever we accept praise on a personal level rather than remembering to whom praise ought to be directed, then we are acting fraudulently,

whether we are aware of it or not. We are trying to deceive others, or ourselves, that we are fit objects of praise, and this simply is not, and cannot, be the case.

We are an audience, invited to witness—as participant observers of sorts, the unfolding of a passion play. If we are witnessing, and participating in, this process of virtual reality in the appropriate way, we will be applauding-with intention rather than action—the One who is producing, directing, filming, casting, writing, staging and reviewing the play. Our responsibilities in this matter involve the attitudes, opinions, intentions, understandings and identifications which are formed through us during the course of the play.

The Sufi is someone who is attempting to inculcate a constant awareness, within herself, himself, or themselves of the abiding truth of the statement: all praise is due to God.

The Sufi is attempting to become, so to speak, supersaturated with the realization of how God is organizing, shaping, directing, producing, and scripting one's life. With God's blessings, the Sufi is struggling toward a deepening understanding of, and appreciation concerning, the multiplicity of ways in which God is present in one's day-to-day life.

If God grants success in the foregoing endeavors, the Sufi comes to know God is never absent from one's life. The individual also comes to understand the following. Only because of our tendency to be absent from God, do we fail to recognize the Divine presence in all things and how this presence gives expression to the incontrovertible character of: all praise is due to God.



## **Chapter 90**

### **Judgment**

Practitioners of the Sufi path believe that, with the exception of a relatively small group of individuals drawn from different backgrounds and historical periods, all people will face a Day of Judgment after death. The exceptions noted above are those people who God will exempt, for reasons best known to Divinity, from going through the judgment process and who, in addition, will be beneficiaries of Divine favor.

The rest of us will be required to give an accounting of our deeds and misdeeds in this life. Moreover, the Sufi masters indicate that on the Day of Judgment we will not be called upon to describe what we did or didn't do. Instead, we will be queried concerning the nature of the motivations and intentions which stood behind our acts of omission and commission.

For those individuals who are skeptical about, or disbelieve in, the possibility of a Day of Judgment, the issue, in a sense, is a very empirical one. All one has to do is wait and see what happens.

If nothing happens—that is, if death is the entrance way to oblivion and the cessation of all consciousness and experience for the individual concerned, then both believers and non-believers will be in exactly the same situation. More specifically, each person, regardless of beliefs, will have done what she or he wanted to do, but there will be no opportunity for joy or regret at having made the correct or incorrect choice.

If, on the other hand, death is not an entrance to oblivion, but, instead, is a gateway to further consciousness and experience, then further possibilities arise. One such possibility is, as Sufi masters have stated, we will have to face a Day of Judgment.

To be held accountable for our actions in the foregoing sense, means there is a functional relationship between what goes on in the present life and what may happen in the life to come. In other words, the choices of this world will have a shaping and conditioning effect with respect to what could transpire in life after death.

In fact, all major religious traditions maintain there is a functional relationship between what goes on in this life and what goes on in life to come. Whether the spiritual tradition is theistic or non-theistic, whether

the tradition allows for reincarnation or does not, all the major faiths contend that, in one way or another, each of us will have to face the consequences, whether to our advantage or to our disadvantage, of our deeds and misdeeds in this world.

One could express the foregoing set of possibilities involving believers and non-believers in terms of game theory strategies. If one were to do this, there seems to be a clear difference in the degree of "rationality" exhibited in the two approaches to the issue of, let us say, judgment.

For example, let us assume, for the sake of argument, nonbelievers are correct and believers are incorrect concerning the nature of what happens (nothing or accountability of some kind) after death. What, if anything, follows from this?

To begin with, non-believers would not be in a position to ascertain the truth or falsity of their position. Confirmation concerning the terminal nature of death requires consciousness, intelligence, experience, and understanding.

Yet, if death marks the end of our consciousness, intelligence, experience and understanding, then the non-believer never can have what he or she needs to prove her or his beliefs to be true. All the non-believer can do is to assume the correctness of his or her beliefs in this regard and proceed through life accordingly.

Furthermore, if there is no life after death, then aside from the consolation of having believed correctly about this issue, nothing substantial really turns on it. All people, whether believers or nonbelievers, experience: birth, pain, difficulty, hunger, struggle, thirst, adversity, doubt, illness, pleasure, understanding, meaning, hope, fear, desire, passion, anger jealousy, pride, friendship, loneliness, alienation, ambition, likes and dislikes.

Our beliefs are the vessels we construct to sail through the ocean of life, with all its beauty and terror. Most vessels are seaworthy in some minimal fashion since they enable the individual to get from birth to death with varying degrees of pleasure, security, pride, accomplishment, comfort, direction, interest and so on.

To be sure, there may be different theories of boat building floating around, but when one suddenly finds oneself in the ocean of life, one tends to



make do with whatever circumstances make accessible to one and proceeds to hold on for dear life. If what appears to be a better theory of boat building drifts by, then, if we can, we may make a decision to undertake building a different kind of ocean going vessel.

The vessel of a non-believer, whom we are assuming is correct, is not any more seaworthy than the vessel of a believer. At best, there is a certain aesthetic superiority to the architecture of the nonbeliever's vessel relative to the structural character of the believer's vessel.

Nevertheless, if a believer persists in sticking with his or her aesthetically less pleasing vessel, or if a believer switches from one aesthetically inferior architecture to another (i.e., changes faiths but still believes in accountability), what really rests on all these aesthetically incorrect choices? The answer is absolutely nothing.

If what non-believers say concerning accountability or judgment after death is true, we still all become so much dust blowing across the footnotes of history. Dust is neither correct nor incorrect ... happy nor unhappy ... satisfied nor full of regrets ... wise nor ignorant. Not only would non-believers not get to say: "I told you so", but even if this sentiment could be broadcast into the graves of dead believers, it would fall on deaf ears.

One might even argue that, if the non-believer is correct, then, within certain limits, a certain amount of delusion of the incorrect believer may prove to be a more watertight material for ship construction than is the truth with which the non-believer builds her or his vessel. A person who believes life has a purpose, even when it doesn't, may be less likely to spring deadly leaks of despair than one who believes life has no purpose, even when this belief is true.

If what non-believers hold to be true were, in fact, true, all values, identities, purposes, meanings, plans, moralities, hopes, aspirations, understandings, projects, methodologies and philosophies become relativized. If there is no system of accountability after death, then all systems of accountability prior to death become arbitrary.

Everything becomes measurable by individual likes and dislikes. One pays one's existential money and is consumed by life in accordance with the metabolic character of the way one chooses to engage life. End of story.

If, however, what the believer holds to be true is, in fact, the case (if, that is, life, of some kind, really does continue after death), then the non-believer is going to face a process of accountability irrespective of what he or she believes. There will be no escape from this, nor will denial do the non-believer any good.

Various believers may have different ideas about what the nature of the judgment or accountability process will be. These believers even may hold diametrically opposed positions concerning what is the true nature of such accountability.

Nonetheless, they all believe accountability becomes a crucial fulcrum around which the conduct of life in this world pivots. Consequently, how one chooses and what one chooses and why one chooses become central themes orienting all of life's judgments and activities.

If we sum up the foregoing comments in the form of a game theory decision matrix, both non-believers and believers are faced with two broad possibilities in relation to the issue of accountability or judgment.

On the basis of the available choices, the worst the believer can do is a neutral or null result. This will occur if the non-believer's assumption proves to be correct.

As indicated previously, the reason this possibility is given a neutral or null designation for both parties is because, ultimately, everything turns out the same way for believers as well as nonbelievers in the event death is the end of the line for us. The only real difference between the two is a highly argumentative and inconclusive consideration concerning the aesthetics of the style of boat with which one will sail into oblivion.

On the other hand, if what the believer considers to be true is, in fact, the case (i.e., there is some kind of judgment or accountability after death), then the believer is in a position to try to take advantage of this possibility. Consequently, the believer has an opportunity to gain (+) by trying to discover those things which will constructively affect one's after-death status and, then, acting on them to the best of her or his ability.

Of course, the opportunity or advantage noted above is only a potential one. If the believer operates on the assumption there is a system of accountability which kicks in after death with respect to one's actions in this

life, there is no guarantee the believer will be operating in conformity with the actual nature of the system of accountability which is in place.

In general terms, however, if the assumption of the believer is true, then the believer, hopefully, will be seeking to modify intentions, attitudes, understanding, and behavior to reflect the reality of things after death. The non-believer, on the other hand, will not be interested in even trying to get his or her intentions, attitudes, understanding and behavior to reflect the requirements of some post-death accountability or judgment system.

In terms of "rational" decision making, the believer can adapt to either reality (i.e., judgment or no-judgment) and come out no worse than a null result as far as general possibilities are concerned. This is not true for the non-believer.

The best the non-believer can do, in the light of the available possibilities, is a neutral or null result. This occurs when the nonbeliever is correct in supposing there is no accountability or judgment after death.

The non-believer might wish to argue that from the point of view of, say, aesthetics, this outcome is not neutral. In other words, whether or not one's moral/value choices reflect, at least in part, the truth of things (e.g., there is no accountability after death), does affect the quality of integrity or authenticity with which life is lived.

Nevertheless, a non-believer probably would have a difficult time convincing other non-believers that a particular theory of aesthetics was "the" proper framework from which all non-believers should build the conceptual boats which will carry them through life. In fact, a non-believer might not be able to offer a conclusive reason to other non-believers why one should bother striving for a life of integrity or authenticity in the first place.

One cannot necessarily argue the non-believer is doomed if there is a system of accountability which will be applied to the individual, whether they like it or not. After all, there may be factors inherent in the actual system of ontological and metaphysical accountability which might place various actions of the nonbeliever in a positive light.

All one can say is that on the basis of what can be proven conclusively (which we are assuming to be nothing at all) and in terms of the

possibilities open to the individual concerning accountability and non-accountability, the non-believer may not be operating as rationally as the believer is as far as decision strategies are concerned. On the other hand, in terms of general principles, and in terms of the options cited, the believer really doesn't have any losing outcomes relative to the non-believer and might be in a position to gain, depending on the character of the accountability or judgment system which is in place.

The non-believer, on the other hand, really doesn't have any winning outcomes relative to the believer (unless one considers an aesthetically flavored technical victory to be a winning outcome). Yet, the non-believer might be in a position to lose if there is accountability or judgment after death.

In addition to comparing believers and non-believers in relation to the issue of accountability or judgment, one also might construct a game theory decision matrix with respect to exoteric and esoteric possibilities concerning the same issue of accountability. One, of course, could choose any number of themes to use as a basis of comparison between the two perspectives. However, the theme being selected for purposes of reflection in what follows revolves around the ideas of true identity and false identity.

Whether one is exoterically or esoterically inclined, false identity is a losing proposition. To be caught up in machinations of the ego, desire, passions, anger, habit, the world, or Satan is counterproductive as far as post-death systems of accountability or judgment are concerned. Indeed, these sorts of entanglements are universally condemned by all the major spiritual traditions, both exoterically as well as esoterically.

Sufi masters maintain the most secure (but not necessarily the only) way of trying to satisfy the conditions of accountability or judgment with which we will be confronted on the Day of Judgment is to die to our false self before we die a physical death. By dying to our false self, we open up the possibility of having our true self unveiled.

From the perspective of the practitioners of the Sufi path, if, God willing, the true self becomes ascendant, all of our intentions will be colored, shaped, and oriented by the spiritually pure and sincere manner in which the true self manifests submission to God. The highest expressions of: spiritual excellence, gnosis, true witnessing, adab, love and servanthood all come through the true self.

As a general principle, and although there may be exceptions to the rule, exoteric methods cannot bring to full realization our true, essential identity. In fact, according to Sufi masters, exoteric methods were never offered to human beings for this purpose.

Exoteric methodology was intended as a starting point for engaging the life of spirituality. Exoteric methodology was intended to provide a path of salvation for the generality of believers. Exoteric methodology was intended to provide a set of principles, practices and parameters through which to bring our varied manifestations of passion and anger into harmony with Divine Command.

On the whole, however, exoteric methods alone cannot lead to the realization of true identity and essential capacity. For this, God willing, to be possible, one needs to supplement and complement exoteric practices with an esoteric approach to spirituality.

Since the realization of true identity is considered by Sufi masters to be the surest way, God willing, to satisfy the criteria of accountability which will become effective after death, then exoteric methodology, taken in and of itself, scores a zero, relative to true identity, as far as providing the individual with the best opportunity for preparing oneself for the demanding requirements of the Day of Judgment. Nevertheless, considerations of what may be the best method for preparing for post-death accountability should not be thought of as being the only way to prepare oneself for that Day.

Consequently, the foregoing comments should not be construed to mean exoteric methodology is not an effective vehicle for seeking to please God or for trying to prepare for the Day of Judgment. Clearly, Sufi masters believe the exoteric dimension of spirituality to be eminently suitable in both respects.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Sufi masters, the intention behind seeking to realize the true self should not be a matter of trying to position oneself to score favorably in the post-death accountability process. Seeking to realize our essential capacity and true identity should be a journey of love which is independent of all considerations beyond that journey taken on its own terms. Fulfilling the purpose of life may coincide, happily, with a passing grade on the Day of Judgment. However, neither a desire for such a passing grade, nor a fear of

failing to obtain that passing mark, ought to be the reasons why a Sufi wishes to fulfill the purpose of life.