



# THE NATURE OF THE SUFI PATH

Dr. Anab Whitehouse



All rights are reserved. With the exception of uses that are in compliance with the 'Fair Usage' clause of the Copyright Act, no portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of the publisher. Furthermore, no part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system, nor transmitted in any form or by any means - - whether electronic, mechanical, photo- reproduction or otherwise -- without authorization from the publisher or unless purchased from the publisher or a designated agent in such a format.

The quotations in this book that have been selected for critical commentary have been drawn from: *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, by William C. Chittick, 2000, One World Publications, Oxford, England.

Copyright, 2018,  
Anab Whitehouse  
The Interrogative Imperative Institute  
Brewer, Maine  
04412



This book is dedicated to the Reality without a Name



Table Of Contents

Introduction – page 11

1 - Sacred Turning – page 13

2 - Who’s Speaking? – page 17

3 - Variations – page 21

4 - Primary Text – page 23

5 - In The Way – page 25

6 - Language – page 27

7 - Reality – page 29

8 - Beyond Concepts – page 31

9 - The Term “Sufism” – page 35

10 - Meaning of ‘Sufi’ – page 39

11 - Starting Points – page 43

12 - Authentic Experience – page 45

13 - Nature of Deen – page 53

14. - Fitra – page 61

15. - Exploring Faith – page 69

16. - Shahadah – page 81

17. - Tower of Babel – page 95

18. - Perfection – page 99

19. - Unity/Multiplicity – page 109

20. - Jamal/Jalal – page 115

21. - Theory – page 133

22. - Negation – page 145

23. - Manifestation – page 153

24. - Signs – page 159

25. - The ‘Trust’ – page 161

26 - Shari’ah – page 165

27. - Understanding – page 173

28. - Interior Life – page 205

29. - Etymology- page 207
30. - Divine Guidance - page 209
31. - Sufi Orders - page 221
32. - Fool for a Client - page 225
33. - Sciences of Deen - page 227
34. - Etiquette - page 229
35. - History - page 235
36. - Purification - page 237
37. - Hagiography - page 243
38. - Matter of Style - page 249
39. - Conflict - page 255
40. - 'Sufi' Label - page 261
41. - Nisbath and Niyat- page 267
42. - Silsilah- page 273
43. - Initiation - page 279
44. - Character Traits - page 283
45. - Reason - page 295
46. - Balance - page 299
47. - Imagination - page 303
48. - Unity - page 313
49. - Similarity - page 317
50. - Union- page 321
51. - Sobriety/Intoxication - page 325
52. - Adab - page 337
53. - Disclosing Secrets - page 341
54. - Poetry/Prose - page 343
55. - Poetical License - page 347
56. - Hallaj And Junayd - page 349
57. - Ibn al-'Arabi/Rumi - page 359
58. - Allegations - page 365

- 59. - Self-knowledge – page 367
- 60. - Mystical Science – page 371
- 61. - Taqwa – page 393
- 62. - Highest Attribute – page 395
- 63. - Essence – page 399
- 64. - Comprehension – page 405
- 65. - Stages – page 409
- 66. - Fana/Baqa – page 421
- 67. - 'Upon His Form' – page 435
- 68. - The Path – page 441
- 69. - Love – page 459
- 70. - Worship – page 469
- Conclusion – page 483



### Introduction

The material that follows consists of 70 commentaries on a book entitled *Sufism: A Short Introduction* by Professor William C. Chittick. These commentaries encompass over 480 pages and the number of pages easily could have been extended.

Many, if not most, of the paragraphs that comprise the 163 pages (preface plus text) of *Sufism - A Short Introduction* contain, in my opinion, problems, errors, misleading statements, and/or incorrect understandings concerning Islam, in general, and the Sufi path, in particular. This is both surprising and disturbing since the author is someone who, apparently, enjoys a considerable reputation in North America -- and, perhaps, elsewhere in the world -- as an expert on, and scholar of, the Sufi mystical tradition.

Quite frankly, in view of the foregoing, I was shocked while reading much of the aforementioned book. I kept waiting for the quality of the work to change feeling that, perhaps, the early chapters were, somehow, anomalous, but, the hoped-for change in quality of that author's understanding never came.

Therefore, on the basis of the evidence provided through the 163 pages of his book, one is forced to come to the conclusion that the author of that book is, unfortunately, neither an expert nor a scholar -- at least, as far as the esoteric dimension of Islam is concerned. Indeed, one does not have to read very much of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* to realize that, apparently, either its author has never had an authentic Sufi teacher, or has never had prolonged exposure to actual travelers of the Sufi path, or, if he has met any authentic spiritual guides or had the opportunity for prolonged exposure to either spiritual teachers and/or travelers of the path, he learned, seemingly, almost nothing from those encounters and associations.

The title of his book could easily have been: *My Ideas: A Short Introduction*. One learns a great deal about the author's theory of the Sufi path, but one learns virtually nothing of value concerning the actual nature of the mystical dimension of Islam.

Regrettably, the author in question is all too typical of a great many people who write books about, are media consultants on, and are hired to introduce students to, both exoteric Islam as well as its mystical dimension. Irrespective of whatever academic credentials these people carry, and irrespective of whatever languages such people claim to know, these

individuals are largely responsible for the mis-education of thousands, if not millions, of people with respect to both Islam and the Sufi path.

Although, in the beginning, the following commentaries were undertaken in order to offer a corrective, of sorts, to the sort of misinformation, distortions, and errors being dispersed through *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, nevertheless, within a short time after initiating the present project, the commentaries were seen as an opportunity to provide the kind of introduction to both Islam and the Sufi path that, God willing, might be of benefit to both Muslims and non-Muslim. This is the primary spirit that has guided the writing of the present book.

Although these commentaries probably are best read from start to finish, they do not have to be read in sequence. All of the commentaries are largely self-contained and, as a result, do not presuppose material from previous commentaries in order to be understood. Consequently, if so desired, an individual could read the present book in whatever sequence seems desirable without being unduly disadvantaged.

Finally, I have no doubt that there are many actual practitioners of the Sufi path who might engage my work and be able to offer more insight into the nature of the mystical path than I have been able to do. Be that as it may, this book was undertaken with the intention of improving on the introduction to the Sufi path that was provided by Professor Chittick in his book.

I do not claim that what I say in this book is a definitive, exhaustive, 'incapable-of-being-improved-upon' treatment of the Sufi path. Rather, my hope is that the present book might move a person closer to the truth concerning the nature of that path than Professor Chittick's aforementioned introduction to Sufism does and, as such, would represent an improvement over his work.

## 1- Sacred Turning

Page vii - Preface: “The ‘whirling dervishes’ were a piece of exotica left over from nineteenth-century travelers’ accounts, but today people learn ‘Sufi dancing’ in health clubs and New Age centers.”

Commentary: Through the context surrounding the above statement, that appears within the Preface of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, the author is quite clear in arguing that despite an increased familiarity in the West with words like “Sufi” and related terms -- such as “whirling dervishes” -- nonetheless, there still exists considerable confusion in the West about what the Sufi Way or Path involves. While granting the general point the author is trying to make concerning the issue of confusion, the author might have begun the process of diffusing much of the confusion almost immediately if he had taken the time to write just a few paragraphs in his Preface to help set a tone and orientation for the remainder of his introductory book.

Unfortunately, this was not done. Instead, seeds were sown in the Preface that are capable of moving the reader in a different direction -- one that sets the stage for adding to the prevailing confusion rather than contributing to the elimination of that misunderstanding.

For example, one can agree with the author that just because the name “sufi” has greater currency today, relative to 50-60 years ago, this does not mean that people currently living in the West have any better grasp of the reality to which this term makes identifying reference. However, the impression one tends to gather from the Preface of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, as well as from other places in his book, is that a great deal of the confusion surrounding the Sufi tradition has to do with the vast and considerably diverse array of understandings concerning this tradition -- many of which, according to the author, portray this ‘path’ in “radically different” ways.

In truth, the major source of confusion concerning the Sufi path is that many of the people who are writing and speaking about this spiritual tradition have had no real, essential, prolonged contact with an authentic, living exemplar of the very tradition that they are purporting to introduce to people. Thus, while one could acknowledge that the term “whirling dervishes” was used by certain people in the West to refer to something going on in the Orient that had been witnessed -- usually in a very limited fashion -- by various travelers to those regions, nevertheless, the activity to

which this term makes reference was never a piece of exotica left over from the nineteenth-century except to those who didn't know the truth about the reality from which the term had been torn. The spiritual practice in question actually has continued, uninterrupted, right down to the present day.

To be sure, there was a period in, for example, Turkey's history -- lasting for much of the 20th century -- in which all Sufi activity was, more or less, publicly outlawed. However, the activity to which the term "whirling dervishes" attempts to make identifying reference actually continued on in private.

In fact, I had the good fortune of meeting with one Sufi shaykh, who used to be a caretaker, many years ago, at the shrine in Konya, Turkey, where the body of Hazrat Jalal ad-Din Rumi (May Allah be pleased with him) is laid to rest. The shaykh with whom I spoke indicated that despite the governmental ban on this kind of Sufi activity, nonetheless, late at night, after the shrine had been cleaned and maintained, the Sufi devotees would gather together and engage in that which had been forbidden by the government.

A second point that needs to be addressed in the quote at the top of the first page, concerns the notion of "Sufi dancing". Although the author is quite correct that there is something being taught today in a lot of places under the rubric of "Sufi dancing" -- including health clubs and New Age centers -- the fact of the matter is that there is no spiritual or mystical practice recognized by authentic Sufi shaykhs that is known as 'Sufi dancing'.

There are Sufi activities, such as 'sacred turning' or 'sacred movement', that are observed by three or four different orders -- including the Mevlevi Order -- that are rooted in the teachings of Jalal ad-Din Rumi (May Allah be pleased with him) and to which the moniker "whirling dervishes" is frequently applied in the West. These practices do, in part, involve, as the foregoing terms suggest, a change of position within space and time, but those spiritual movements are no more dancing than are the movements of a drill team on a parade ground or are the movements of people going about their business in the course of everyday life.

The idea of "Sufi dancing" is a Western innovation often involving a nifty two-step piece of conceptual choreography. First, one removes virtually everything of essential importance from the mystical tradition except the "Sufi" label, and, then, one interjects into this emptied label an arbitrary set of activities that one identifies as a Sufi practice known as "dancing" -- an activity that, historically, was never observed by any of the Sufi Orders.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* purports to be introducing people to the 'reality' of the Sufi path and, supposedly, is attempting to clear up confusions concerning this spiritual way. Yet, when he has a golden opportunity to do just this in his Preface, he backs away.

People who considered "whirling dervishes" as a piece of exotica left over from the nineteenth-century, knew nothing of the reality of the context out of which this term emerged. Similarly, people who speak approvingly of "Sufi dancing" tend to be ignorant of the underlying reality of "sacred turning" or "sacred movement".

Consequently, nothing really has changed. People who know, knew then, and know now. People who do not know did not know then and do not know now.

The author could have, in his own way, pointed these things out in his Preface. He did not, and, instead, went in a different direction -- a problematic one as it turns out.



## 2 - Who's Speaking?

Page vii - Preface: "The great surge in books on Sufism over the past few years has made a large amount of information available, but in certain ways it has added to the confusion. The academic books are too specialized and technical to be useful for beginners, and the much greater number of books written by enthusiasts or Sufi teachers present radically different views about Sufism's reality. The scholars impose their own conceptual schemes from the outside, and the enthusiasts look at the tradition from the privileged position of insiders, but limited to specific contemporary branches of Sufism. In this book I have tried to find a middle way between academic obscurity and enthusiast advocacy."

Commentary: If "scholars impose their own conceptual schemes from the outside", then, irrespective of the 'specialized', 'technical' or 'obscure' nature of these schemes, one needs to raise the question of whether academics have anything useful to say about the Sufi path. At heart, the Sufi path is not a conceptual scheme, and, consequently, the academics have two strikes against them before they even begin -- namely, they are trying to conceptualize something that cannot, in any essential way, be conceptualized, and to add possible insult to possible injury, they might be doing so from the outside ... which means independently of any essential understanding of the Sufi path as the expert practitioners of that path (e.g., authentic shaykhs and/or those actually engaged in suluk or spiritual journeying) understand this process.

Secondly, the fact that someone is an "enthusiast" of something -- in this case, the Sufi path -- doesn't automatically make that individual qualified to speak authoritatively about the 'something' in question. Moreover, one cannot assume, as the author does, that an 'enthusiast' looks at the subject matter from the "privileged standpoint" of an insider.

In addition, not everyone who claims to be a Sufi teacher, or on behalf of whom those claims are made, is authentic. On the other hand, while every authentic Sufi teacher or shaykh does have a deep, abiding love for the Sufi path, the author does them a great disservice to refer to them, or lump them in with, mere enthusiasts, as if the whole thing were some kind of hobby or interesting past time.

The author claims that "books written by enthusiasts or Sufi teachers present radically different views about Sufism's reality". The author goes on to

add that while these people look at this spiritual path from “the privileged standpoint of insiders”, nevertheless, this ‘privileged standpoint’ is “limited to specific contemporary branches of Sufism”.

If one throws out the writings of unqualified enthusiasts or inauthentic teachers -- both of whom certainly do not write from the privileged standpoint of insiders and, therefore, are quite irrelevant to the discussion -- then, one wonders what the author means by the idea of there being “radically different views about Sufism’s reality” among qualified, authentic shaykhs. One also wonders what could be meant by the author’s passing, unelaborated comment that the teachings of those shaykhs are “limited to specific contemporary branches of Sufism”.

Since every human being, including shaykhs, are unique creations of Divinity, then, one would not be surprised to hear there might be differences, of understanding, of one sort or another, among shaykhs. Furthermore, because different shaykhs have different spiritual capacities and/or might be writing out of different spiritual states and stations, one also would expect to encounter, from time to time, certain differences of description among these shaykhs.

However, to conclude that the underlying understandings concerning the reality of Sufism are radically different just because there are differences among some Sufi shaykhs does not necessarily follow. A lot would depend on the cases in question, and a lot also would depend on what is meant by “radically different” -- a term that is nowhere clearly expounded by the author.

Furthermore, to suggest, as the author does, that because the teachings of a shaykh might be from a specific branch of the Sufi path, then, this fact somehow makes those teachings “limited” is not really warranted. While there might be differences of emphasis and methodology from branch to branch or Order to Order, there is nothing limited about the underlying essence of what is being taught -- teachings that are shared and agreed upon across branches and Orders however differently the teachings might be expressed in linguistic terms.

Finally, the author claims he has “tried to find a middle way between academic obscurity and enthusiast advocacy”. Since the author seems to have lumped Sufi teachers and enthusiasts in together (he certainly does not clarify this situation at all in his Preface), the author appears to be setting himself up as someone who is going to do what Sufi teachers -- who,

'apparently', are engaged only in "enthusiast advocacy" cannot do -- that is, get to the reality of the Sufi path.

The author has described enthusiasts and Sufi teachers as not only people who radically differ with one another about the nature of the Sufi reality, but the author also has depicted them as those who speak out from a perspective that is "limited to specific contemporary branches of Sufism", as if being a "contemporary" branch were, somehow, a disqualification. Notwithstanding what already has been said about the question of authenticity with respect to 'enthusiasts' or 'teachers' -- and, therefore, the total irrelevancy of what unqualified people have to say about the Sufi path -- nevertheless, if a contemporary branch of a Sufi Order enjoys a valid chain of spiritual transmission or barakah going back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), then, the aspect of being "contemporary" is really neither here nor there.

Truth is neither ancient nor contemporary. The truth of a point of view is a matter of correctness and accuracy concerning the capacity of that perspective to reflect some dimension of "what is" irrespective of when a perspective might be espoused.

The author of the quotes for which commentary is currently being given is an academic. As such, one would assume he is speaking -- to use the author's own words -- 'from outside' the Sufi tradition and, therefore, seeking to impose his conceptual schemes on this tradition. On the other hand, the author might be an insider -- someone whose view (according to the author), though "privileged", is radically different from other enthusiasts and Sufi teachers and who speaks from a point of view that is "limited to specific contemporary branches of Sufism."

We don't know which, if any, of the foregoing two possibilities applies because the author never reveals what the basis of his claim is for trying to negotiate the middle path between "academic obscurity and enthusiast advocacy". If he is neither an outsider, nor an insider, then, what is he?

This question is not an idle one. As indicated previously, the author claims a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding is, and has been for some time, swirling about the nature of the Sufi path, and he has set as his goal an elimination of such confusion and misunderstanding. Consequently, one would like to know from precisely what vantage point the author intends to achieve his purpose, and one needs to raise the question of whether, or

not, that “vantage point” is capable of delivering what the author says he would like to try to accomplish.

### 3 - Variations

Page vii and viii - Preface: “The Sufi tradition is far too vast and diverse to attempt anything like a definitive statement about what it entails, but few would deny that there are unifying themes.”

Commentary: If the author is going to include, somewhat indiscriminately, all the works of ‘enthusiasts’, irrespective of the authenticity or quality of these works, as well as include all the works of so-called Sufi teachers, irrespective of whether those people actually are legitimate shaykhs, then, one might suppose that what is being labeled as the “Sufi tradition” is, indeed, vast, diverse, and exceedingly difficult to state in definitive terms. If, however, the author does not intend to include all of these pseudo-teachings under the heading of “Sufi tradition”, then, until one knows just what he means by the Sufi tradition, one is not in a position to judge whether the author is correct in saying that the Sufi tradition is “too vast and diverse to attempt anything like a definitive statement”.

On the other hand, if there are unifying themes within the Sufi tradition -- and there are -- then, one wonders why these unifying themes can't be used to construct a fairly accurate description -- as far as those sorts of descriptions go -- concerning the nature of the Sufi path. Such a construction will not be definitive, since that which is, ultimately, ineffable and trans-rational cannot be encompassed by purely conceptual discourse, but one need not be concerned about the definitiveness of a description as long as the latter points one in the right direction and provides useful and accurate information concerning the nature of the Sufi path.

In fact, perhaps, with the right set of unifying themes, a lot of the vastness and diversity to which the author is alluding might come to be understood as variations on certain central principles. Indeed, one might venture to maintain that if the Sufi tradition were as vast and diverse as the author alleges, then, trying to find a starting point, let alone a path to follow, would be next to impossible -- but this is not the case, and there is a long history running through the Sufi mystical tradition that is capable of countermanding such a position.



#### 4 - Primary Text

Page viii - Preface: "I have provided a relatively large amount of translation from primary texts, because any attempt to understand Sufism in its own context demands looking at its own ways of expressing itself, not simply at interpretations made in contemporary terms."

Commentary: There are several presumptions inherent in the foregoing. One of these presumptions is that one must study the way the proponents of the Sufi path express themselves if one wishes to understand this spiritual Path. This presumption is not correct.

A Sufi teacher who was a close friend of my first shaykh once said: "There have been so many Rumi's who have never uttered a word". The Sufi path has never been about the literature -- poetry or prose.

Although both the spoken and written word have important roles to play within the Sufi tradition, this tradition is not primarily transmitted through either the written or spoken word. The essence of this tradition passes from heart to heart in a direct fashion unmediated by words. This is known as "sina bin sina".

Another presumption inherent in the foregoing quote is the author's belief that he understands what he is translating and, therefore, that he has translated the material correctly. In many cases, translations tend to reveal more about the translator than they do about the writer's work that is being translated, and this is especially true of many renderings of mystical literature.

Alternatively, an individual might do a good job of translating a certain text and, yet, still not really understand the meaning or significance of what has been translated. In other words, the process of translation entails several components -- some of which are linguistic and some of which are hermeneutical. An individual might do a very competent job of producing a proper linguistic rendering of a given text being translated, but, nevertheless, this same individual might not be able to "merge horizons" (a term used within hermeneutics) with all of the layers and nuances of meaning of the original that are being given expression through the language of the translation.

While one might agree with the author's contention concerning the importance of trying to understand the Sufi tradition in its own context, this context will not necessarily be supplied through translations. In fact,

irrespective of whether, or not, translations draw upon primary material, they tend to take one away from the true context of the Sufi tradition that is the relationship between a living Sufi teacher and her or his student.

Anyone who believes one will come to understand the Sufi path merely by examining primary source material and providing translations of such is sadly mistaken. One might just as well argue that one can understand the reality of a tornado merely by reading and translating primary scientific literature on this topic.

If a person wishes to understand the Sufi tradition, then, the individual will have to traverse the path. There is no other way.

The author of the quote on which this commentary is based has said that one cannot understand the Sufi path merely by looking “at interpretations made in contemporary terms”. This is the second time within a few paragraphs that the author has spoken somewhat disparagingly of things of a contemporary nature.

If this allusion is to those in modern times who would try, from the outside, to impose their own subjective, conceptual interpretations upon the Sufi tradition, then, one could agree with the author. If, however, the author is suggesting there is something wrong with authentic Sufi teachers in contemporary times and that they are, somehow, to be less preferred than translations based on primary source material when seeking an understanding of the Sufi tradition, then, the author is, quite simply, incorrect.

The living book is always preferable to the dead one, and ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) -- a favorite subject for translation by Professor Chittick -- says as much in his writings. Consequently, the author might have made a lot more fruitful progress in his quest to alleviate the confusion surrounding the Sufi tradition if he had taken the time he spent in translating primary source material and devoted that time to finding a living exemplar of what he is seeking to understand, and, then, reporting what that exemplar had to say.

### 5-InTheWay

Page viii - Preface: “My goal throughout is to let the tradition speak for itself...I take as my mentor here Abd ar -Rahman Jami (d. 1492) who writes as follows in the introduction to his well -known Sufi classic *Lawa 'iii'*:

‘It is hoped that none will see in the midst  
the one who has embarked on this explication...  
since the author has no share save the post of translator,  
and no portion save the trade of speaker.’

Commentary: Sadly, the goal of the author (and I do not mean Jami – may Allah be pleased with him) has not been realized, and one of the purposes underlying the current commentaries on the author’s book is, among other things, to demonstrate this fact. Ironically, the author fails in precisely the way he hoped not to -- that is, by ‘his’ being in evidence throughout his explication (through, for example, his interpretations) and, as a result, he does not let the Sufi tradition speak for itself. Instead, we are left, on all too many occasions, with the author’s version of the Sufi tradition rather than the actual reality itself.



## 6 - Language

Page ix - A Note On Sources: "This book is based on primary sources, written in Arabic and Persian. Arabic is a Semitic language, a sister of Hebrew and Aramaic, and the most important language of Islamic civilization."

Commentary: As indicated earlier, if the author's book were really "based on primary sources", it would have been rooted in the author's personal relationship of mystical/spiritual learning, over an extended period of time, with an authentic Sufi shaykh. Primary linguistic sources cannot come alive unless one learns how to engender such a process through the assistance of one who understands something of the 'niyat' (spiritual intention), 'himma' (spiritual aspiration), and 'nisbath' (relationship of spiritual sincerity and love) of the author of those primary sources.

In addition, from the Sufi perspective, Arabic is not "the most important language of Islamic civilization." The speech of the heart is far more important, for if there is something amiss with this latter faculty, then, the spiritual significance and meaning of what is given expression through the Arabic language will never be properly appreciated or understood.

Finally, a distinction needs to be drawn between Islamic civilization and Muslim civilization. Muslims have said, written, and done many things in the name of Islam, but many of those actions really have nothing to do with Islam. The Arabic of Muslims is one thing, and the Arabic of Islam is quite another.



## 7 - Reality

Page 1 - Chapter One: “More than a thousand years ago, a teacher called Ali, the son of Ahmad, who hailed from the town of Bushanj in eastern Persia, complained that few people had any idea of what “Sufism” was all about. “Today,” he said, speaking Arabic, “Sufism is a name without a reality, but it used to be a reality without a name.”

Commentary: The observation made by Ali was not just a complaint that “few people had any idea of what ‘Sufism’ was all about”. It was a complaint about the increasing numbers of people in his time who were appropriating the title of Sufi and mystics to themselves but who had no commitment to, or understanding of, the truth underlying the term. Ironically, this state of affairs is not unlike the situation prevailing in our own times.

In addition, although the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does not specify the nature of the reality to which Ali was alluding in his complaint, the reality was none other than the inner, esoteric dimensions of the Qur’an and the Sunnah (practice or actions) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Why the author of the aforementioned book chose to leave this information out is rather mystifying.

The term “Sufi” did not exist in the time of the Prophet. However, there was a reality reflected in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as well as in the life of certain other close Companions of the Prophet, which, subsequently, became the focus of the spiritual tradition to which the term “Sufi” came to be applied by various individuals some time after the Prophet passed away from his physical body.

Some of the individuals who later referred to themselves as Sufi, had abandoned the practices, teachings, and way of life that was, and is, at the heart of the reality that was being alluded to by Ali, son of Ahmad. These were the people who were demonstrative proof that in his time there were, in all too many cases, people calling themselves by a name that had no reality -- at least not in the original sense that was inherent in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and in the lives of many of his close Companions, as well as in the lives of many individuals across the centuries -- right down to modern times -- who sought out and devoted themselves to this reality.



## 8 - Beyond Concepts

Page 1 - Chapter One: “Nowadays in the West, the name [Sufism] has become better known, but its reality has become far more obscure than it ever was in the Islamic world. The name is a useful label, but the reality will not be found in definitions, descriptions, and books. If we do set out looking for the reality, we will always have to keep in mind that the divide between our own times and the times of Ali ibn Ahmad Bushanji - when the various phenomena that came to be named ‘Sufism’ were just beginning to have a shaping effect on Islamic society - is so deep and stark that it might be impossible to recover anything more than the dimmest trace of it.”

Commentary: Contrary to what the author states above, the name “Sufism” is not a useful label. In fact, it is quite misleading since it suggests that the reality to which this name is making reference is just another “ism” like: socialism, communism, capitalism, and so on.

The reality being referred to is not a conceptual system. It is not a theoretical system.

This reality is a precious dimension of Being. It transcends whatever label one wishes to attach to it, because all those labels are the products of discursive processes that fall far short of the reality to which reference is being attempted.

There also is a sense in which the author is not quite correct when he says this “reality will not be found in definitions, descriptions, and books.” While one can acknowledge that this reality cannot be circumscribed by any given definition, description or book (with one exception), in point of fact, this reality shines through the written and spoken words of many spiritual luminaries across the ages.

This reality envelopes and permeates everything that those luminaries do. Consequently, whenever one comes across the sayings, teachings, and writings of these individuals, one’s heart tends to be attracted by the perfume of this reality as it emanates and radiates from their words.

Furthermore, the clear exception to what the author maintains above (i.e., that this reality will not be found in books) is the Qur’an that is the uncreated Word of God. Allah says of the Qur’an: “We have neglected nothing in the Book” (6:38), and it is a book whose woof and warp are expressions of the Reality in question.

Of course, the author might have had in mind just “normal” books that are written by mortal human beings. Even here, however, the author is not quite correct because, depending on whom one is discussing, this reality can be found -- albeit in a limited form of manifestation -- within the works of various spiritual luminaries whom God has graced with the talent and understanding to communicate certain facets of this reality to other individuals.

In the quote with which this current commentary began, the author claims that the differences between the times of Ali ibn Ahmad Bushanji and our own might be so great that one might not be able “to recover anything more than the dimmest trace” of that reality. Once again, the author is mistaken.

The author’s claim seems to imply that the reality in question once was, but cannot be found now, except, perhaps, through the dimmest of traces left behind in original source material. The author’s claim seems to suggest that one must come to understand the way things were in ancient times in order to be able to get even a fleeting glimpse of the reality being sought.

Yet, what makes a human being, human -- namely, an innate capacity to be receptive to the reality in question -- is universal. It is not a function of times, per se, even if some ages might give a brighter indication of the presence of this reality than do other ages.

The practitioners of this reality have always taught that one merely needs to look within, in the right way (and this ‘right way’ is at the heart of what is being taught and, as well, alludes to the necessary barakah, or spiritual blessing, that enables inner vision), and, if God wishes, one will come to realize the overwhelming presence of this reality. This inner potential is something that both transcends times, as well as points to a common bond shared by all those individuals who sincerely aspire to seek the realization of this reality to the best of their God-given capacities to do so.

Finally, the author maintains that the time of Ali ibn Ahmad Bushanji was a period “when the various phenomena that came to be named ‘Sufism’ were just beginning to have a shaping effect on Islamic society”. This, too, is incorrect -- and in several ways.

A “phenomenon” is something that is visible or directly observable, and while the reality in question might have given rise, from time to time, to the bubbling forth of certain kinds of visible phenomena, the reality to

which reference is being made cannot be reduced to a set of phenomena. Somewhat like an iceberg, the reality in question lies almost entirely beneath the visible surface -- at least relative to most observers.

Secondly, the reality in question was not "just beginning to have a shaping effect on Islamic society" during the times of Ali ibn Ahmad Bushanji. This reality was hard at work, so to speak, during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In fact, this reality was active during the life of all 124,000 Prophets, beginning with Adam (peace be upon him).

True Islamic society is this reality made manifest in the lives of its practitioners within such a society. As such, one must make a distinction between Muslim society and Islamic society since the former does not always permit the latter to be established.



### 9 - The Term "Sufism"

Pages 1 and 2 - Chapter One: "One easy way to avoid searching for Sufism's reality is to replace the name with another name. We often hear that Sufism is "mysticism" or "esotericism" or "spirituality," usually with the adjective "Islamic" tacked on front. Such labels can provide an orientation, but they are both far too broad and far too narrow to designate the diverse teachings and phenomena that have been identified with Sufism over history. They can never do more than hint at the reality Bushanji had in mind, and they might be more of a hindrance than a help, because they encourage people to file Sufism away unthinkingly into a convenient category. In order to justify using one of these alternative terms, we would have to provide a detailed and careful definition and analysis of the new term, and the three I mentioned are notoriously vague. Even if we could provide an adequate definition, we would still have to explain why it is appropriate for 'Sufism'".

Commentary: The author fails to make clear why replacing the name "Sufism" with some other name -- such as "mysticism", "esotericism", or "spirituality", qualified by the adjective "Islamic", is an "easy way to avoid searching for" the 'reality without a name'. However vague any of the three terms cited above might be, qualifying them with the adjective "Islamic" goes much further in establishing a recognizable and legitimate starting point from which to venture forth in seeking the reality without a name than does the term "Sufism" on its own.

By using the modifier "Islamic", one immediately knows at least three things that one does not necessarily know when one uses the term "Sufism". Whatever the truth might be concerning the ultimate or actual nature of: "Islamic mysticism", "Islamic esotericism" or "Islamic spirituality", the Qur'an, the life of the Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the Prophetic tradition [which begins with Adam (peace be upon him)] will be of paramount importance in guiding an individual along the Path which that, God willing, to the reality without a name.

The author claims that although a term like "Islamic mysticism" can provide a certain sort of orientation, nonetheless, according to the author, those terms "are both far too broad and far too narrow to designate the diverse teachings and phenomena that have been identified with Sufism over history". If one leaves aside the rather mystifying idea of how a term can be, simultaneously, both "too broad and too narrow", one only has the author's allegation (i.e., still without evidentiary support) that the teachings

concerning the 'reality without a name' are too diverse to be meaningfully aligned with a term such as "Islamic mysticism".

Furthermore, in addition to the already noted point that the 'reality without a name' is not a phenomenon, nor a function of phenomena, one also should understand that what has, or has not, "identified with Sufism over history" is neither here nor there. The issue is not the term "Sufism" but, rather, the 'reality without a name' with which some usages of this term (i.e., Sufism) later became associated in certain linguistic circles.

The 'reality without a name' is primary. The term "Sufism" is purely secondary and derivative.

The history of the latter term cannot be used as a standard for the former reality. More specifically, neither language, nor language usage, nor the history of language usage can serve as a substitute for Being.

According to the author, terms like "Islamic mysticism" or "Islamic esotericism" are problematic "because they encourage people to file Sufism away unthinkingly into a convenient category". This claim is made without further elaboration. However, this claim is hardly an a priori assertion whose truth instantly can be recognized merely by examining the author's allegation.

Among other things, one would like to know which "people" are being encouraged in this fashion. One also might like to know how those terms "encourage" these individuals to file away the relevant issues "unthinkingly" into "a convenient category" ... whatever is meant by "convenient".

One easily could turn the tables on the author and say that terms like "Sufism" are "more of a hindrance than a help" because it encourages "people to file" 'Islamic mysticism' "away unthinkingly into a convenient category". After all, one would like to know why the author seems so insistent on making the history of the term "Sufism" to be the litmus test of what is or isn't of importance in the quest to realize the 'reality without a name'?

The author maintains that any use of alternative terms such as: "Islamic mysticism", "Islamic esotericism", or "Islamic spirituality", need to be justified through providing "a detailed and careful definition and analysis of the new term, and the three I mentioned are notoriously vague". Presumably, any term will be "notoriously vague" prior to elaboration, and, presumably,

the purpose of such elaboration is to render a term that once was vague into somewhat less vague language.

Of course, one cannot know if this sort of elaboration of an initially vague term would satisfy the author's criteria for 'justifying' the usage of such a term, since the author does not spell out what he believes is entailed by the notion of justification. Similarly, he does not establish a precise context for specifying what he means by "a detailed and careful definition and analysis of the new term" or whether this is even an appropriate or heuristically valuable exercise with respect to acquiring a better understanding of the 'reality without a name'.

Rather arbitrarily, however, the author has decided that "Sufism" is, somehow, not as "notoriously vague" as the three terms he mentioned that are prefaced with the modifier "Islamic". Yet, strangely enough, up to this point of his book, the author has been making no point more consistently than that "Sufism" is a very vague and difficult--perhaps impossible-- term to grab hold of conceptually.

Finally, the author argues that "even if we could provide an adequate definition [of one of the three alternative terms prefaced by 'Islamic'], we would still have to explain why it is appropriate for "Sufism". This way of arguing is putting the cart before the horse.

As indicated previously, the term "Sufism" is not the benchmark for what is to be considered as acceptable or unacceptable discourse in relation to the 'reality without a name'. The benchmark for such discourse is the 'reality' in question, and the challenge is to try to find one or more ways that permit the explorer or seeker to realize the truth of the 'reality without a name' that is being sought – to whatever extent this is possible.

Islam is not answerable to "Sufism". Rather, the latter is answerable to the reality of the former since it is the essential reality of the former to which Ali ibn Ahmad Bushanji, presumably, was making reference when he spoke about a 'reality without a name'. This was a reality that was manifested through the lives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his close Companions, and those who pursued the essence of the spiritual model exemplified in those lives -- especially the model of the Prophet--during subsequent generations of seekers.

One might note that a distinction is being made in the foregoing between 'Islam' and 'the reality of Islam'. More specifically, daily prayers can be

observed, fasting during the month of Ramadan can be done, pilgrimages can be performed, charity or zakat can be given, an individual can submit to the fact that God does, indeed, exist, or, any number of other spiritual litanies can be practiced, and, yet, there is no guarantee in all of this that the essential reality of Islam will ever be approached, let alone realized.

The life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was rooted in the realization of the reality of Islam considered in the latter's most essential, broadest, and richest sense. It is this kind of realization that is the 'reality without a name'. Islam is a prescribed Path or Way to follow in order to approach such a realization even if one might not be able to travel this Path with the same degree of success that was evident, by the grace of God, in the lives of Muhammad (peace be upon him) or the other Prophets and friends of God.

There are many states and stations along this Way that must be traversed before one begins to reach the shores of the 'reality without a name', and not everyone who begins the trek finishes it, and, therefore, knowing something of Islam, and, yet, knowing almost nothing of the 'reality without a name' to which Islam invites us need not be a contradiction in terms.

## 10 - Meaning Of 'Sufi'

Page 2 - Chapter One: "If we look at the Arabic original of the word Sufism (sufi), we see that the term is already problematic in Islamic civilization. Although it was widely used in several languages, it usually did not have the broad meaning that it now has acquired. Its current high profile owes itself mainly to the writings of Western scholars. As Carl Ernst has pointed out in his excellent introduction to the study of Sufism, the word was given prominence not by the Islamic texts, but rather the British Orientalists, who wanted a term that would refer to various sides of Islamic civilization that they found attractive and congenial and that would avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the religion of Islam - stereotypes they themselves had often propagated.

"In the Islamic texts, there is no agreement as to what the word *sufi* means, and authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy. Those who used the word in a positive sense connected it with a broad range of ideas and concepts having to do with achieving human perfection by following the model of the prophet Muhammad. Those who used it in a negative sense associated it with various distortions of Islamic teachings. Most Muslim authors who mentioned the word took a more nuanced stand, neither accepting it wholeheartedly nor condemning it."

Commentary: Although the author indicates toward the beginning of the above quote that: "if we look at the Arabic original of the word Sufism (sufi), we see that the term is already problematic in Islamic civilization", he doesn't bother to say anything about what the Arabic original of this word is. In truth, since the precise origins of this word are shrouded in something of a mystery, there is no "Arabic original", per se, at which to look.

To be sure, there are several linguistic/etymological candidates that have been advanced by various early authors [e.g., al-Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him) in *Kashf al-Mahjub*] that provide something of a context through which one might approach the term "sufi". However, to claim, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does that the introducing of those kinds of possibilities makes the term "problematic" does seem warranted.

In fact, when Sufi masters like al-Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him) run through some of the linguistic/etymological candidates -- such as *safa* (purity) and *suf* (wool -- a reference to the garments of coarse wool

worn by some of those who were said to be pursuing the ‘reality without a name’), these exercises are used to introduce the reader to important dimensions of the mystical/spiritual/esoteric path connected to the ‘reality without a name’. Consequently, irrespective of what the actual origins of this term are, the occasion of raising the question of linguistic/etymological origins is used constructively by such authors and not at all in the problematic fashion alluded to, but left unexplained, by the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*.

After admitting that the meanings that have been attached to the ‘sufi’ term in modern times are much broader than when this term first began to appear in Arabic and Persian and after indicating that the term “sufi” owes much of its current high profile to Western Orientalists (see the quote with which this present commentary began), the author goes on to assert that: “in the Islamic texts, there is no agreement as to what the word *sufi* means, and authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy”. The author does not specify what “Islamic texts” he is talking about, nor does he specify any authors who supposedly “commonly argued about both” the meaning and legitimacy of this term.

Blanket assertions devoid of evidence are relatively useless, but even if the author could bring forth a certain amount of information indicating there were some Muslim (not necessarily ‘Islamic’) texts and authors who might have commonly engaged in arguments about such matters, genuine Sufi masters are unlikely to have wasted much time in such endeavors. For instance, al-Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him), in the aforementioned *Kashfal-Mahjub*, one of the oldest extant treatises exploring different facets of the mystical path leading to the ‘reality without a name’, said the following:

“To a Sufi, the meaning of Sufism is clearer than the sun and does not need any explanation or indication. Since “Sufi” admits of no explanation, all the world are interpreters thereof, whether they recognize the dignity of the name or not at the time when they learn its meaning.” (Page 34 of the Nicholson translation)

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, “most Muslim authors who mentioned the word took a more nuanced stand neither accepting it wholeheartedly nor condemning it”. In reality, most Muslim authors had little understanding of the ‘reality without a name’. Consequently, one might suppose discretion is the better part of valor in such cases and that a “nuanced stand” which neither accepts nor condemns

the term is entirely appropriate when dealing with subject matter on which one is not qualified to offer an opinion.

More importantly, if most Muslim authors were inclined to remain neutral about the term due to their ignorance concerning that to which the term “sufi” made identifying reference, then, it is really misleading -- as the author has done in the quote with which this commentary began -- to try to give the impression there were, from the beginning, problems swirling about the use of this term. Among Sufi shaykhs whatever differences might have existed concerning the origins of this term are likely to have been minor, peripheral, as well as not worth arguing about, and the opinions of everyone else were irrelevant since they really didn’t know what they were talking about in this context.

Therefore, to claim, as the author does, that “in the Islamic texts, there is no agreement as to what the word *sufi* means, and authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy” is really misleading in several ways. First, to try to give the impression that all “Islamic texts” (that is, texts written by Muslims on issues that might, or might not, pertain to Islam) are of the same quality when it comes to understanding the significance of the term “sufi” and, therefore, presumably worthy of being considered equally authoritative in such matters is simply not tenable. At the very least, such a claim lacks discernment.

Secondly, to contend that “authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy” makes it sound like Sufi shaykhs were a bunch of bickering children who were, like all too many academics, more concerned with terminology and definitions rather than the ‘reality without a name’. In truth, whichever, if any, authors were “commonly” arguing about the meaning and legitimacy of this term, these authors were not likely to be Sufi shaykhs since the vast majority of Sufi shaykhs never wrote anything at all, and of those shaykhs who did write, they had much more important issues to explore than arguing about the meaning and legitimacy of the term “sufi”.



## 11 - Starting Points

Page 2 - Chapter One: “The modern studies of Sufism reflect the disagreements over the word found in the primary texts. Scholars do not agree among themselves as to what the name means, and any number of definitions and descriptions can be culled from their studies. I will not add to this confusion by providing my own definition, but I will use the word because it seems less inadequate than the alternatives. My purpose, however, will be to try to get at the reality behind the name...”

Commentary: The primary texts of the Sufi tradition are the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are absolutely no disagreements over this word (i.e., Sufi) that can be found in these texts.

What the author is calling “primary texts” are, in actuality, the secondary and derivative materials that are rooted in the true primary texts that have been noted above. Furthermore, what the author is referring to as “disagreements” are, for the most part, merely indicative of the manner in which different teachers chose to characterize some dimension of the ‘reality without a name’ for purposes of initiating discussion and reflection amongst those who either had, or might have, an interest in seeking that ‘reality’.

Where one begins on the Sufi path is vastly less important than where one ends up. Characterizing the term “sufi” in one way or another is not so much intended to serve as a definitive rendering of this word as it is meant to serve as a doorway through which to begin the process of exploration.

The fact one teacher might invite individuals to the ‘reality without a name’ through one door rather than another is more a reflection of teaching style than it is of any disagreement over the meaning of a term. The differences among modern scholars concerning the significance of the ‘sufi’ term is less a reflection of the disagreements existing in the secondary and derivative textual materials of Sufi shaykhs than it is a failure to understand that different shaykhs chose to use different starting points as a matter of individual teaching style and not because there was any basic disagreement about where all these doors eventually led.

The author indicates he will not add to the confusion of modern studies by introducing a definition of his own with respect to the word “sufi”, but, he goes on to assert that, nonetheless, he will use this term “because it seems less

inadequate than the alternatives". The reasoning underlying this decision is not at all apparent since the author really hasn't even attempted to give any of the alternatives a fair hearing. Instead, he has, as pointed out in a previous commentary, merely rejected such possibilities out of hand ... vaguely referring to the "notorious vagueness" of such terms in passing.

If the author wishes to use this term (sufi) without specifying a definition but, rather, as a word that seems to be at the hub of a lot of ideas and concepts that he feels are relevant to his discussion, and, therefore, has heuristic value, then, this is a perfectly valid place for him to begin his examination. However, this decision has absolutely nothing to do with any alleged 'inadequacy' of some of the alternative terms that he mentioned but did not develop.

## 12 - Authentic Experience

Page 3 - Chapter One: "In the early texts, scores of definitions were offered for the words "Sufi" and "Sufism", just as scores of definitions were offered for numerous other technical terms associated with the same teachers. Although it would be possible to begin with one or more of these definitions, it might be more useful simply to suggest that Gibb is on the right track when he implies that Sufism is equivalent to 'authentic religious experience.' In other words, the early Sufi teachers held that they spoke for the animating spirit of the Islamic tradition. From their point of view, wherever this spirit flourishes, Islam is alive to its own spiritual and moral ideals, but to the extent that it languishes, Islam becomes desiccated and sterile, if it survives at all."

Commentary: Leaving aside the already noted point that many of the early texts might not have been so much preoccupied with engaging in exercises of definition that were necessarily to be considered as absolute and definitive as much as they just might have been establishing conceptual starting points through which to provide entry points to further exploration (after all, one does have to start somewhere), one might also wish to add certain qualifying considerations with respect to the author's contention that Gibb is "on the right track when he implies that Sufism is equivalent to 'authentic religious experience'." In fact, questions can be raised with respect to each of the three terms in the phrase that the author borrows from Gibb, and, questions also can be raised as to whether "Sufism is equivalent to" these three terms taken collectively as the author suggests.

Let us begin with the word "religious". This is the middle term in Gibb's phrase, and there are a number of ways in which this word can be understood.

For example, in one sense, the 'religious' concerns any belief system that, on the one hand, reflects upon the meaning of existence vis-à-vis human beings, as well as in conjunction with the rest of the universe, and, then, on the other hand, speaks about the nature of the link between the parties of the first part with 'Reality' in some absolute sense of this latter referent. Often, a word such as "God" or "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" or "Allah" (or many other possibilities) is used to name this Reality, but such a word is not absolutely necessary as long as there is an understanding that there is some essential or fundamental Ground which not only underwrites the existence of the universe and the inhabitants of that universe but which has some sort of relationship with the universe that has been established -- a

relationship that stands in need of critical explication either through philosophical, scientific, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and/or theological disciplines.

There is, yet, another sense of the 'religious', however, that -- initially at least -- is not primarily about belief systems per se. Instead, paramount importance is placed on the role that phenomenology or the experiential has in revealing various levels of non -conceptually mediated connectedness between the physically observable universe and the whole of Reality.

In this latter approach to the religious, the rational mind plays, at best, a secondary and after-the-fact role. In fact, within the perspective of this second broad approach to the 'religious', the rational mind needs to be transformed and brought into harmonious alignment with much more essential faculties of knowing and understanding.

In this latter approach to the 'religious', there might be post-experiential attempts to gauge the meaning, purpose, value, or significance of some given aspect of phenomenology that appears to have trans-rational, non-ordinary, and essentially transformational currents running through such an experiential field, but these attempts at reconstruction are derivative and not always to be trusted as being accurately reflective of what actually is going on in the realm of phenomenology.

Both of the previous senses of the term: 'religious', are from the human side of things. In other words, whether one approaches the 'religious' primarily in terms of a "belief system" or in terms of phenomenological encounters with the 'Real', or some combination of these two modalities of engagement, we are talking about what human beings are thinking or experiencing in relation to their link with Being considered as some sort of whole, all inclusive, totality of possibility.

There is a third sense of the 'religious' that is not human - centered but Real-centered. In this sense of the 'religious', how human beings think about, or feel toward, or believe in, or interpret, or experientially engage existence takes a back seat to the way things actually are, and the task becomes a matter of realizing, according to capacity, the truth of 'what is' in this sense.

In Islam generally, and the Sufi path, in particular, this process of Real-centered, staged, realization is known as "Deen". Deen is the process of

discovering the essential nature of our being, and the term that is used in relation to this essential nature is “fitra”.

Deen is not ‘religious’ in either of the first two senses of this latter term (i.e., ‘religious’). That is, Deen is not a belief system, nor is it something that places primary emphasis on experiences or phenomenology of a certain kind. Deen is a process of taking or guiding one back to, and bringing to fruition, original, essential nature.

Systems of belief might spring up in relation to Deen, and, as well, there might be certain kinds of non-ordinary, trans-rational phenomenology that are experienced while engaged in the ‘way of deen’, but neither of these is synonymous with Deen nor can ‘Deen’ be reduced down to being functions of either, or both, of these senses of the ‘religious’, or some combination thereof.

“Religion” and “religious” are man-made words serving human purposes -- sometimes doing so in a useful fashion and sometimes doing so in a problematic fashion. Both of these words carry a great deal of conceptual, emotional, and historical baggage, and, as a result, this tends to interfere with coming to understand the nature of either ‘Dee n’ or ‘fitra’ from the perspective of the ‘Real’ – at least, as best this can be done through human spiritual capacity.

Consequently, to try to equate Sufism with “authentic religious experience” might not put us as much on the ‘right’ track as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* might suppose. At the very least, the notion of the ‘religious’ needs to be properly qualified along the lines suggested above.

Now, let’s take a look at the word “authentic” which is the first word of the tripartite phrase (‘authentic religious experience’) that the author has borrowed from Gibb -- a phrase the author is offering as something that might be synonymous with the meaning of “Sufism”. To begin with, “authentic” is a term that implies there is a standard or set of standards through which the character of something can be judged as being “authentic” -- as opposed to being ‘inauthentic’.

There are several ways to approach this question of standards. For instance, one could set forth some set of criteria that is to be used in differentiating the authentic from the inauthentic, and this would require, in turn, a discussion of why one set of criteria was selected rather than some other such set.

Another possibility is to begin with the contention that every experience is “authentic”. In other words, in as much as experiences are lived by someone, they are, in some sense, links to what is, or part of what is, or expressions of what is, and, consequently, all experiences constitute potential clues in any given individual’s attempt to try to understand what the significance or meaning of such experience is.

This way of looking at things assumes that irrespective of what one takes to be the ultimate nature of life or truth or reality, nevertheless, all experience- - no matter how trivial or exalted, no matter how sordid or noble -- has value because all experiences generate data that can be used for reflection, inquiry, exploration, critical analysis, and so on, concerning the nature of existence. This shifts the focus away from the issue of “authenticity” and, instead, directs attention toward the challenge of trying to uncover the meaning and/or purpose and/or significance of our experience -- whatever that experience might be.

All experience has the capacity to teach. The question, then, becomes whether, or not, we will learn what experience has to tell us about ourselves and the universe in which we rooted.

Earthly existence is constrained by two outer boundary markers -- birth and death. In between these two boundary markers is a journey of experience that, according to the Sufi masters, will either take one toward realizing what is at the heart of this journey or will lead one away from this sort of realization.

In this context, guidance becomes a matter of assisting an individual to work toward developing a sense of discernment concerning experience and, therefore, how to evaluate this experiential realm in terms both of what will bring one closer to the aforementioned realization as well as what will generate problems, confusion, obstacles, and so on with respect to the issue of realization. All experience is authentic, and all experience is valuable, but one needs to be able to evaluate experience in terms of its ability to assist or hinder essential realization concerning the journey of life.

Sufi shaykhs work with a person wherever that individual might be within her or his journey of experience. They don’t tell the person that such-and-such an experience is authentic or inauthentic -- rather, they say that all of the individuals experiences are authentic, and, then, proceed to help the individual understand just what they are authentic expressions of -- for

example, the lower self, the body, the world, the spirit, Satanic suggestion, the heart, this condition, that stage, this state, that problem, and so on.

The Sufi path is a very long journey. If one had to wait just for the possible experiences of essential realization before labeling something “authentic”, then, seemingly, most people who step onto the Sufi path would, for the most part, be immersed in a process that is deemed to be overwhelmingly inauthentic (a rather depressing thought, to say the least) and, therefore, of questionable value. Yet, what makes all of the experiences of this journey valuable is the role they play in pointing out the direction to travel if one hopes to attain realization concerning the significance of the journey as a whole.

This brings us to the third facet of the phrase “authentic religious experience” -- namely, “experience” -- that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is advancing as a possibly synonymous expression for “Sufism”, or, at least, an equation that might help get us started on the right track. Moreover, in view of the stress given above to the idea that all experience has authenticity, one might suppose the author is correct to suggest that the Sufi path is about “authentic religious experience”. However, such is not the case.

Since, as pointed out previously, all experience has a quality of authenticity, to contend that the Sufi path focuses on ‘authentic religious experience’ doesn’t get one very far. In fact, as important as experience is, what is more important is the character or condition of the ‘channels’ through which experience flows.

Experience is not an end in itself but is a means to an end. The end is to return to the potential of one’s Origins and realize that potential so that experience serves, and gives expression to, the purpose for which the potential exists.

The nature of experience is colored, shaped, and oriented by many factors. Physical condition, emotional states, motivational forces, conceptual biases, beliefs, values, spiritual commitments (or lack thereof), and so on, all modulate the character of experience.

Therefore, one can distinguish between, on the one hand, experience and, on the other hand, the faculties or forces or factors that modulate experience. We learn from experience when there is some sort of alteration in the process that modulates experience and, as a result, permits

experience to be understood in a different way than previously had been the case.

Experience is valuable because of the implications, hints, clues, and so on, it carries with respect to our capacities to modulate experience. Experience is valuable because of the way it tends to lead to reflection concerning the factors that color, shape, and orient experience.

To be sure, reflection and thought, for example, have experiential components. However, the capacity for: thought, reflection, and awareness (or emotion, or motivation, or sensation, or spirituality) are not experiences, per se, but the generators, modulators and processors of experience.

The quality or character of experience won't change until different dimensions of these capacities alter the manner in which experience is processed and/or understood. The emphasis here is not on experience, per se, but on the processes surrounding experience and out of which experience arises.

If one would like to change the quality or character of experience, one must, first, change one's modality of engaging such experience. The Sufi path uses experience as a tool with which to probe that which surrounds experience and, thereby, shapes, colors, orients and qualifies experience.

The Sufi path is not about producing certain kinds of experiences. Instead, it is a way of helping an individual to tap into different dimensions of the very faculties and capacities through which experience is processed.

Whatever experiences might come, the Sufi emphasis is on processing or engaging or understanding those experiences in a manner that is an increasing function of the fully realized essential nature or 'fitra' of the individual. Experiences will look after themselves if only we will look after that which modulates and processes them.

'Deen' is the exploratory journey of transformation of the channel- ways through which experience flows. Experience in the absence of such transformation will always remain authentic, but one might never come to understand the significance, nature, and purpose of such experience since one needs a transformed 'self' to appreciate that experiential authenticity is a spectrum of possibilities pointing beyond the horizons of experience, per se, back to the Ground out of which all experience arises.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, to say that “Sufism” is synonymous with “authentic religious experience” is another way of saying that “the early Sufi teachers held that they spoke for the animating spirit of the Islamic tradition. From their point of view, wherever this spirit flourishes, Islam is alive to its own spiritual and moral ideals, but to the extent that it languishes, Islam becomes desiccated and sterile, if it survives at all.”

In truth, the “animating spirit of the Islamic tradition” speaks for itself, and all authorized Sufi teachers know this. “Wherever this spirit flourishes” Muslims are alive to their own spiritual possibilities, and to the extent Muslims fall away from this spirit, Muslims and Muslim civilization (not Islam) become “desiccated and sterile”, if they survive at all.

Deen, which is the animating spirit of Islam, is God given. It can never become desiccated and sterile.

Failure is entirely on the human side of things. Muslims fail in their pursuit of, and commitment to, ‘Deen’.

The latter is incapable of bringing about the failure of anyone who is sincerely committed to its principles and methodology. Indeed, the One Who has established ‘Deen’ as a means of realizing the truth about human nature, has an inherent predisposition to be inclined to, and responsive toward, expressions of sincerity in the pursuit of Deen.



### 13 - Nature of Deen

Page 4 - Chapter One: “According to this hadith, the Prophet and a few of his companions were sitting together when a man appeared and asked him several questions. When the man departed, the Prophet told his companions that this had been the angel Gabriel, who had come to teach them their religion (din). As outlined by Gabriel’s questions and the Prophet’s answers, the religion of Islam can be understood to have three basic dimensions. Those familiar with the Koran, the wellspring of Islamic teachings, will recognize these three as constant Koranic themes, though nowhere does the Koran provide such a clear and succinct overview. The three are “submission” (islam) “faith” (iman), and “doing the beautiful” (ihsan).

“The Prophet defined submission as “to bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger, to perform the daily prayers, to pay the alms tax, to fast during Ramadan, and to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca if you can find the means to do so.” He said that faith is “to have faith in God, His scriptures, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to have faith in the measuring out, both the good of it and the evil of it.” He said that doing the beautiful is to “worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”

“The first two categories, “submission” and “faith” are familiar to all students of Islam. They correspond to the religion’s “Five Pillars” and its “three principles,” or to practice and belief, or to the Sharia (the revealed law) and the creedal teachings. The “Five Pillars” are voicing the testimony of faith, doing the daily prayers, paying the alms tax, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca. The “three principles” are the assertion of divine unity (tawhid), prophecy, and eschatology. What needs to be noticed is that the third category mentioned in the hadith - “doing the beautiful” - is just as important for the Prophet’s definition as the other two, but its meaning is not nearly as clear.”

Commentary: For reasons noted earlier, and to reiterate an important point, “religion” is a problematic rendering of the term “Deen” or “din”. While many scholars and lay people have become habituated to treating “religion” and “Deen” as synonyms, the fact of the matter is, such an equating process is a conceptual imposition that judges two things to be the same when such is not the case.

Religion is a man-made conceptual framework. 'Deen'(Din) is a God-given methodology or path or way for struggling toward realization of human potential. Now, an individual certainly might use the former (i.e., religion) to develop a theory about the latter (i.e., Deen). However, the one is not the other, and the two should not be confused or conflated.

Alternatively, someone might wish to take exception with the contention that Deen is God-given and either (1) argue there is no God, and, therefore, there is no Deen to be given by 'that' which does not exist, or (2) argue that God did not give the sort of Path or Way to which Islam gives expression -- although God might (according to such an argument) have given some other Path or Way. Nonetheless, if one is attempting to understand the nature of the Sufi perspective (as the author claims to be doing), then, one should try to interject as little subjective, theoretical, or conceptual baggage, as possible, into the search for understanding (something the author also has gone on record as indicating that this is a goal of his).

Consequently, one would be starting out on a much sounder, less distortive basis, as far as seeking an understanding of the Sufi perspective is concerned, if one were to avoid treating Islam as a religion, theory, conceptual framework, or theological system. Islam is a Deen.

Religions, theories, conceptual frameworks, and theologies are things that are being imposed on Deen from the outside, rather than dimensions inherent in Deen. The task or challenge is to try to come to understand, as much as is humanly possible, what Deen is about from the Divine side of things.

The Hadith that is summarized by the author in the quote with which this commentary began identifies three important dimensions of Deen. These are "islam", "iman", and "ihsan".

The author indicates that while, time and again, all three of the foregoing themes are spoken of in the Qur'an, he is of the opinion that nowhere in the Book revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him) are things stated in such a "clear and succinct overview". The author seems to forget that the Prophet, himself, had said that the entire meaning of the Qur'an was contained in Surah Fatiha and that, moreover, the entire meaning of this Surah was contained within "Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Raheem" (Through the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) with which the Surah

began, and, finally, that the entire meaning of “Bismillah-ir-Rahman ir-Raheem” is contained within the dot beneath the letter ‘Bey’ of “Bismillah”.

In another Hadith the Prophet stipulated there were seven levels of meaning within the Qur’an. To one who does not have access to the kind of insight into the nature, depths, subtlety, and richness of the Qur’an to which the Prophet was alluding, then, the clarity and succinctness contained within these levels of meaning will not be obvious, but one cannot use the limited viewpoint of the former to gauge the quality of the latter.

As the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* presents his summary of the Hadith outlining “islam”, “iman”, and “ihsan”, he makes several slips. For instance, while delineating the different aspects of “iman”, he, inexplicably, leaves out any mention of the angels - a fundamental part of iman. Later on in his overview he says that the first of the “Five Pillars” is “voicing the testimony of faith”.

Actually, the first pillar of ‘islam’ is a matter of bearing witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God. Bearing witness is more than just a matter of voicing a testimony of faith.

Bearing witness requires a certain internal acceptance of, and positive attitude toward, what is being voiced. In fact, saying the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying zakat, and going on pilgrimage are all practical, concrete expressions of what is entailed by ‘bearing witness’, but ‘bearing witness’ also extends beyond these four other pillars. This is because the first pillar specifies one needs to bear witness that there is no reality but God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God, not just in the context of the four other Pillars but with respect, as well, to every aspect of life.

To be sure, the first article of faith (as opposed to the first pillar) also requires one to embrace the truth that there is no reality but God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God, but, now, one must do so at a deeper level. Faith is not a matter of mere conceptual belief but is a species of knowledge from which doubt has been removed to a degree that is commensurate with the level of faith. The greater the faith, then the greater the amount of the doubt that has been removed from a certain kind of spiritual knowledge. The smaller the faith, then, the lesser the amount of doubt that has been removed from one’s spiritual knowledge -- although in

order to still qualify as, at least, a minimum degree of faith, there must be both the presence of some kind of knowledge, along with the absence of some degree of doubt concerning that knowledge.

For instance, at one juncture, the Qur'an corrects some bedouins who had declared before Muhammad (peace be upon him) that they professed faith in God and the Messenger. The Prophet was instructed, through the Quranic revelation that descended at that time, to tell those bedouins not to say they believed, but to say, rather, that they had submitted, since faith had not, yet, entered their hearts.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, 'iman' is a matter of "creedal teachings". However, 'iman' is neither a creed nor a set of doctrinal teachings.

Faith cannot be taught merely by listing various doctrines or beliefs. In fact, although exemplars or models of faith can be documented -- and the Qur'an, as well as the life of the Prophet are filled with such documented exemplars and models, the essence of faith can only be acquired, God willing, through individual struggle (which is, on the whole, a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquiring faith).

Indeed, in a sense, faith is the spiritual knowledge one acquires during this struggle and from which God has removed some degree of doubt concerning the truth of what one has learned. Consequently, to have faith in God and the angels, in the scriptures and the Prophets, as well as in the Last Day and the preordained measure of things -- both good and evil -- requires something more than a mere listing of beliefs, doctrines or creeds.

When, as the Qur'an indicates in many places, God increases or promises to increase someone in faith upon faith, this is not a matter of adding more belief to existing belief, or more doctrine to existing doctrine, or more creed to existing creed. When faith is added to faith, then, on the one hand, some degree of knowledge is being added to what one already knows, and, on the other hand, some additional degree of doubt is being removed from whatever level, or kind, of doubt one previously had concerning spiritual knowledge.

Being convinced that something is true is not the same thing as having faith in the truth of that same something. Among other things, conviction need not require any knowledge about that in which one is convinced, but to have

faith without an attendant knowledge of an appropriate nature is a contradiction in terms.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* translates “ihsan” as “doing the beautiful”. There are other ways of characterizing this term -- one such way being “spiritual excellence”.

These different ways of rendering the reality toward which “ihsan” is directing our attention are not necessarily antithetical to one another. There is a beauty about the performance of ‘spiritual excellence’, and ‘doing the beautiful’ is, certainly, an expression of spiritual excellence.

In any case, the author maintains that while students of the Islamic tradition are familiar with the notions of submission and faith, or ‘islam’ and ‘iman’, respectively, nevertheless, when one comes to the third element, ‘ihsan’, mentioned in the Hadith summarized by the author, “its meaning is not nearly as clear” as is that of ‘islam’ and ‘iman’. This contention needs to be explored a little.

Strictly speaking, the Prophet did not characterize ‘ihsan’ as either a matter of “doing the beautiful” or ‘spiritual excellence’. The Prophet said that ihsan was a matter of worshiping or serving God as if one could see Him but that even if one could not see God one should know that God certainly sees you. Others have characterized those who embody this principle as exhibiting ‘spiritual excellence’ or as ‘doing the beautiful’.

Every act of a human being is a potential forum for worshiping or serving God. To worship or serve God through ‘ihsan’ is to have a level of focus, awareness, and intensity introduced to one’s activities that might be somewhat different from, but is related to, both ‘islam’ and ‘iman’.

In fact, ‘ihsan’ is a continuation of ‘islam’ and ‘iman’. Just as ‘iman’ added something to ‘islam’ without abandoning the latter, so too, does ‘ihsan’ add something to both ‘islam’ and ‘iman’ without abandoning either of these other dimensions of Deen.

In other words, ‘iman’ lends an intensity and focus to ‘islam’ that was absent in the beginning of things. Similarly, ‘ihsan’ lends an intensity and focus of its own to ‘iman’ and ‘islam’ that has to do with a specific kind of knowledge -- namely, the awareness of God’s Presence in all facets of life ... an awareness that might be absent from both ‘islam’ and ‘iman’, in and of themselves, even though ‘ihsan’ is an intense, focused, and nuanced form of both ‘islam’ and ‘iman’.

In the terminology of the Sufi path, 'islam' (in the sense of accepting, and being inclined toward, the "Five Pillars"), 'iman', and 'ihsan' are all expressions of different degrees of 'nisbath' or the character and quality of the link between 'fitra' (essential capacity or potential) and Divinity as mediated through Deen. 'Islam' (in the sense of accepting, and being inclined toward the "Five Pillars") contains within itself the seeds of 'iman', just as 'iman' carries within itself, the seeds of 'ihsan'.

According to the Qur'an, the name that God gave to Deen upon its being completed -- in the sense of being fully explicated by Allah through revelation -- was Islam. Deen is more comprehensive than that portion contained within Deen that is subsumed under the "Five Pillars" and which is known as 'islam'.

At the same time, the 'islam' of the "Five Pillars" marks the beginning stages of acknowledging, aligning oneself with, and realizing the nature of Deen in the broader sense that also incorporates 'iman' and 'ihsan' -- and more. Although 'islam' is often translated as meaning "submission", the submission at the starting point of the "Five Pillars" is not the same level of submission as is entailed by the spectrum of possibilities contained within 'iman', nor is the submission of the initial entry point, the same as the submission that is marked by 'ihsan' -- but, all three are species of submission.

When 'iman' and 'ihsan' are, by the Grace of God, added to the "Five Pillars", then, one is engaging Deen in its broadest sense. This is when true submission enters the picture, and the individual begins, by the Grace of God, to exhibit the qualities of being an 'abd or servant of God in a fuller, more realized sense of Deen.

'Ihsan' is not something apart from 'islam' and 'iman'. Each of these informs the other in accordance with their respective domains of engagement, commitment, understanding, and awareness. Taken collectively, they give expression to important dimensions of Islam, but the potential of Islam is not exhausted by them.

There are many unspecified dimensions and aspects: of "bearing witness", as well as of the knowledge entailed by 'iman', as well as of the nature of worship when one does so through the realities of condition of 'ihsan'. These unspecified aspects extend into, envelop, and permeate every aspect of life and spiritual potential when pursued to their outer limits of possibility for any human being of a given spiritual capacity.

On the way toward struggling to realize the 'reality without a name', the Sufi path assists the individual to explore all of these unspecified dimensions and aspects of 'islam', 'iman' and 'ihsan', without abandoning any of the specified facets of these three expressions of Deen. When, by the Grace of God, Deen leads to the realization of the essential identity and unique spiritual capacity of 'fitra', then, the full purpose of Islam is served.

In short, the Sufi path is the study of the process of becoming a fully realized and functioning servant of God according to one's God - given capacity to do so. This path starts with 'islam' in the more restricted sense of the "Five Pillars, and works toward Islam in the more extended sense of a Deen that leads, eventually, God willing, to the realization of the full potential of one's essential nature or 'fitra', and when this occurs, then, the 'reality without a name' blossoms and bears its intended fruits.



14 - Fitra

Pages 5 and 6 - Chapter One: “On the most external level, Islam is a religion that tells people what to do and what not to do. Right and wrong practices are delineated and codified by the Sharia, which is a compendium of systematic law based squarely on Koranic teachings and prophetic practice, but adjusted and refined by generation of scholars...”

“On a deeper level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to understand the world and themselves. This second dimension corresponds to the mind. It has traditionally been called “faith,” because its points of orientation are the objects to which faith attaches - God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and so on...”

“On the deepest level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to transform themselves so that they might come into harmony with the ground of all being. Neither activity nor understanding, nor both together, are humanly sufficient. Activity and understanding need to be focused in such a way that they bring about human goodness and perfection. This goodness is inherent and intrinsic to the original human disposition (fitra) created in God’s image ....”

Commentary: While one could agree that one way of engaging Islam is as a compendium of ‘what to do and what not to do’ that is “based squarely on Koranic teachings and prophetic practice”, nevertheless, there are only a little over 500 verses (out of some 6000+ verses) in the Qur’an that are directed toward Shari’ah-type injunctions, and, moreover, there is a great deal in the life of the Prophet that extends beyond his role as a custodian of Divine Law considered in the narrow and restricted sense given expression through the 500 verses alluded to earlier. Even in their most outward senses the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet were manifesting models that were more than a function of Shari’ah considered as a litany of permissions and prohibitions.

In fact, one might easily argue that people (first in 7th century Arabia, and, then, subsequently, down through history and throughout the rest of the world) were first attracted to, or captivated by Islam, due to a set of readily accessible considerations other than Shari’ah in the usual sense of this term. More specifically, on the one hand, people were attracted to the way the Qur’an informed human beings about God, themselves, their history, the universe, as well as the spiritual possibilities inherent in life and, thereby, provided people with a manner of being oriented to existence as

a whole. In addition, people who became Muslim were attracted by the numerous ways in which the life of the Prophet gave expression to love, kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, honesty, integrity, compassion, selflessness, sincerity, commitment, gentleness, humility, friendship, loyalty, and a host of other qualities. Finally, many people, especially those who knew Arabic, were attracted to the incredible beauty -- both in the sense of linguistic structure as well as in terms of the richness of meanings -- of the recited Qur'an.

None of the aforementioned considerations has anything to do with the constraints and permissions of Shari'ah, and, yet, they are among the most readily accessible features of the Islamic tradition. Indeed, before someone commits herself or himself to struggling with the requirements of Shari'ah, an individual must be motivated or induced to do so by factors other than the Shari'ah taken solely in itself, and it is the general metaphysical, moral, and spiritual models of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet that provide such motivation for the vast majority of people.

Now, one cannot necessarily refer to this initial attraction that arises out of exposure to the non-Shari'ah facets of the Islamic tradition as either knowledge or faith since the individual might not have any insight into the nature of that which is attracting one or which she or he finds attractive with respect to Islam. Nonetheless, there is an inclination present that is capable of leading, in time (sometimes quickly and sometimes not), to acknowledging or acquiescing or bearing witness, in some minimally necessary way, to the truth of the first Pillar of Islam -- namely, that there is no reality but God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the messenger of God.

The four other Pillars of Islam follow from this starting point, and, indeed, give structured expression and direction to this initial acceptance of the reality of the first Pillar. Consequently, the author's contention that the Shari'ah constitutes the most external sense of Islam would seem to be incorrect, or, at the very least, in need of qualification.

The author goes on to argue that "on a deeper level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to understand the world and themselves. This second dimension corresponds to the mind. It has traditionally been called 'faith,' because its points of orientation are the objects to which faith attaches - God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and so on."

The author is confusing two different loci of understanding -- mind and faith. Perhaps part of the reason for this confusion is that both 'mind' and 'faith' are considered by many of those whom are academically, philosophically or theologically inclined, to have to do with belief systems that purport to give expression to knowledge or understanding concerning the nature of some given focus of attention.

Approached in this fashion, faith is one of the products generated by the activities of the mind in which a firm conviction is invested in some given belief. In turn, the mind is considered to be a function of an array of rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, forces.

When the activities of the mind generate an understanding that is said to reflect, more or less accurately, some aspect of the world or experience, then, this result tends to be referred to as a piece of knowledge or information concerning the world or experience. Critical reflection often ensues at this point concerning whether, or not, such claims of knowledge are justified in these sorts of instance, and, if so, to what degree or extent are they justified and what are the criteria of justification.

'Faith' is neither a belief system nor the product of mental processes. At the same time, however, faith is something that can both shape beliefs and mental processes as well as be shaped by belief systems and mental processes.

For example, previously, faith was characterized as a state, station, or condition that consisted of both a certain kind of knowledge, together with some level of doubt (or absence thereof). When knowledge is increased and/or doubt is decreased (due to actual insight), faith is said to be greater, and when knowledge is decreased and/or doubt is increased, then faith is said to have declined or waned or wavered.

An enhanced condition of faith can inform, color, shape, direct, and orient the processes of the mind. On the other hand, the processes of the mind not only introduce doubt, questions, and confusion into the realm of faith but can, as well, offer up important information to be engaged by the heart and explored in the latter's search for greater certitude concerning knowledge about the nature of truth or reality.

However, faith is rooted in the workings of the heart. It is not a product of mind if the latter is understood to be a factory of interacting, if not

competing, rational, irrational, conscious and unconscious conceptual processes.

When the mind seeks to pass judgment on the processes of the heart, the mind is entering into a realm that is beyond its grasp or understanding. Nevertheless, having said this, one cannot argue, as previously noted, that any strongly held opinion or conviction an individual might have is necessarily an expression of faith in the sense of a way of knowing that is rooted in the workings, states, stations and conditions of the heart as a faculty of understanding that is separate from the workings, states, stations and conditions of the mind.

Therefore, one could agree with the author's contention that faith often entails something deeper than the Shari'ah considered as a compendium of prohibitions and permissions. On the other hand, the author is incorrect when he treats 'faith' as an activity or product of the mind.

In addition, the author's contention that this deeper level of Islam -- which involves, from his perspective, mind and faith: "teaches people how to understand the world and themselves" is not quite correct. The process of teaching people a way of understanding "the world and themselves" had, as noted earlier, already begun, in all likelihood, upon initial exposures to the Islamic religious tradition -- irrespective of whether these initial exposures were through the Qur'an or the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or someone who was following the Deen of Islam. Indeed, this kind of understanding about the world and themselves might have been important parts of any decision to formally commit themselves to trying to live in accordance with Shari'ah rather than the other way around.

Of course, faith -- in the sense of knowledge about some aspect of spirituality, Deen, fitra, or the like -- would also teach people about the world or themselves and would do so at a deeper level than would be the case through initial exposures. However, as indicated previously, this deeper knowledge would not be mind-generated, and, moreover, this deeper understanding, which is rooted in faith, actually would be closely linked to an individual's observance of, and commitment to, the various facets of Shari'ah that the author cited as being merely a matter of the external level of the Islamic tradition.

The author also maintains that this second, deeper level of Islam -- a level he associates with the mind -- "has traditionally been called 'faith' because its points of orientation are the objects to which faith attaches ... God,

the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and so on.” To begin with, whatever one might think about “angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and so on”, God is not an object, but for the author to word things in this way does tend to indicate he is looking at ‘faith’ as largely a mental, conceptual issue.

Although rather ambiguous in as much as the referent of “its” is somewhat unclear (i.e., does “its” refer to the activities of mind or to faith?), the author states that “its points of orientation are the objects to which faith attaches”. Presumably the form of this ‘attachment’ is a mental one or is an expression of the operations of mind, however, the author does not elaborate on this so one is left with a certain amount of uncertainty concerning the nature of this ‘attachment’.

Whether one treats ‘faith’ as a mental process or as a heart process or as some other kind of process, the same set of questions can be asked. Is there a subject-object dichotomy between faith and that which is known through faith, or is faith another kind of relationship of knowing altogether quite apart from object-subject splits in which that to which ‘faith’ attaches itself is some sort of object separate from the activity of faith? And, if the latter should be the case, then, what is the nature of this relationship of knowing that is rooted in something besides object - subject splits?

This set of issues and questions will be encountered again during later stages of the examination of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* and, God willing, they shall be more fully elaborated upon at those junctures. For now, let it be said that faith is a way of knowing something in accordance with a condition of heart that is ‘open’ -- to varying depths (depending on the richness and quality of this knowledge), as well as to varying degrees of clarity (depending on the amount of doubt present) -- to the reality of what is known in faith.

In other words, faith is not the sort of knowledge that arises from the outside of that which is to be known. Instead, faith operates from within whatever is being known and reflects, to varying degrees of depth and clarity, the reality of what is known. From this perspective, faith is not a form of knowing that attaches to some object of mental engagement, such as God. Rather, faith is, in this case, a form of knowing that is rooted in some dimension of Divinity.

Similarly, when faith is considered in the context of “angels” “scriptures”, “prophets”, and so on, the knowledge in question is not an understanding that is constructed mentally and represents an ‘object’ of

knowledge that is removed from the knowing process. Instead, something of the reality of the realm of 'angels', 'scriptures', 'prophets', and so on, is known through the participation of faith in this realm of reality.

To borrow a phrase from hermeneutics, faith 'merges horizons' with what is to be known through the heart. The extent of this merging and the nature of the horizons involved depends on the strength and quality of the faith involved.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that on its deepest level, "Islam is a religion that teaches people how to transform themselves so that they might come into harmony with the ground of all being". This is not quite correct.

People cannot transform themselves. Only God can bring about this transformation.

Just as the author points out that "neither activity nor understanding [i.e., adherence to Shari'ah and the knowledge of faith respectively], nor both together, are humanly sufficient" to lead to the fulfillment of human potential, so too, the mystery of spiritual transformation is beyond the ability of human activity and understanding considered in and of themselves. The Will of God alone is both necessary and sufficient to effect such a transformation.

Nevertheless, the seeds for the possibility of transformation are planted through, among other things, struggling to establish Shari'ah and faith within one's life. Human effort is a necessary prerequisite for the possibility of subsequent spiritual transformation even though struggle and effort, considered in themselves, are not enough to effect such changes.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "activity and understanding [i.e., adherence to Shari'ah and the knowledge of faith, respectively] need to be focused in such a way that they bring about human goodness and perfection. This goodness is inherent and intrinsic to the original human disposition (fitra) created in God's image."

Irrespective of how an individual might try to focus "activity and understanding", these will not, in and of themselves, "bring about human goodness and perfection". Islam is not a set of techniques concerning, for example, Shari'ah, faith and focusing that can be applied like some sort of complex algorithm which, merely through reiteration or repetition, will

permit the desired result of “human goodness and perfection” to be forthcoming. Acceptance of human efforts lies entirely with the Will of God.

Furthermore, while one could agree, in some broad sense, that the ‘potential’ for “goodness and perfection” are inherent in, and intrinsic to, “the original human disposition” or fitra, what is meant by ‘goodness and perfection’ might extend, in part, beyond the realm of ‘ihsan’ as exalted as this latter stage or station or condition might be. For, although the ability to worship or serve God as if one saw Him might be part of the equation, there might be more to the essence of goodness and perfection than just this facet of things.

The Hadith cited by the author does not prohibit this possibility. The Prophet was answering questions as they were asked, and while ‘islam’, ‘iman’ and ‘ihsan’ are fundamental aspects of the Deen being taught by Gabriel (peace be on him), the potential of ‘fitra’ that is mentioned in the Qur’an (and to which the author also refers in the quote with which the present commentary began) might both include, as well as extend beyond, the three aforementioned facets of Deen

The foregoing possibility (i.e., that the potential of fitra might involve more than ihsan) is very much related to the issue of being “created in God’s image” -- a phrase that is mentioned at the very end of the quotation from the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* that forms the focus of the current commentary. What is meant by the phrase “created in God’s image”, and what principles might be inherent in the understanding underlying this phrase, might have a great deal of bearing on developing a better sense of what is involved in the ‘reality without a name’.

In fact, it is conceivable (and this will be explored later on in other commentaries) that the goal might not be “goodness and perfection” per se. The goal might be the realization of the potential of fitra that gives expression to goodness and perfection in accordance with the capacity of fitra to do so.

God alone is good and perfect. So, whatever fitra might be, it fulfills its role or function or purpose or potential by ‘being’ in accordance with what God’s goodness and perfection require of it (i.e., fitra).



### 15- Exploring Faith

Page 6 - Chapter One: “The Hadith of Gabriel talks about *iman* or “faith” in terms of its objects, and these specify points of reference that are needed to understand the nature of things. In another Hadith, the Prophet spoke about the meaning of the word *iman* itself. “Faith”, he said, “is to acknowledge with the heart, to voice with the tongue, and to act with the limbs.” This Hadith suggests that human beings are compounded of three domains ranked in a clear hierarchy - heart or inmost awareness, tongue or articulation of understanding, and limbs or bodily parts. These three domains are distinct, yet thoroughly intertwined. In as much as they are distinct, they came to be studied by different disciplines and judged by different standards.

“Acting with the limbs”, or putting faith into practice, is the domain of jurisprudence. It is here that people “submit” to God’s will by obeying the commands set down in the Shari a.

“Voicing with the tongue” is the realm of expressing faith through articulated self-awareness, or rational speech. Human beings are differentiated from other animals precisely by their power of speech, which expresses and conveys the awareness hidden in the depths of the heart. As a domain of learning, voicing faith belonged to those Muslim scholars who investigated the best ways to understand God, the universe, and the human soul.

“Finally, “acknowledging with the heart” is to recognize the truth and reality of faith’s objects in the deepest realm of human awareness. The “heart” in Koranic terms is the center of life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality. The heart is aware and conscious before the mind articulates thought, just as it is alive before the body acts. Faith’s inmost core is found only in the heart. The Prophet seems to be referring to this core when he says, “Faith is a light that God casts into the heart of whomsoever He will.”

Commentary: Contrary to the author’s foregoing contention, the Hadith of Gabriel did not talk about ‘iman’ in terms of its objects. The author is slipping in a whole metaphysical and epistemological set of issues of his own choosing through the term “objects”.

Faith does have a focus or orientation of its own, but this does not necessarily mean that this focus or orientation is toward something else outside of that faith. Indeed, the Hadith with which the above quote closes

indicates that “faith is a light that God casts into the heart of whomsoever He will.”

This light radiates its own understanding. It is its own illumination. It is the focus of its own penetrating insight. It is oriented toward its own nature and ‘structure’ in accordance with the degree of the light that has been cast into the heart by God.

The individual who has received this blessing ‘sees’, via the heart, everything else through the light of such faith. It is knowledge which engages existence through the ‘eyes’ and properties of such light.

Just as physical light comes in many different wavelengths, so too, the light of faith has its own forms of ‘wavelength’ that are expressed through the infinite spectrum of degrees of faith-knowledge from among which God might choose, as He will, to cast into the heart of a given individual. The properties of a given instance of faith are a function of the specific degree of knowledge that has been selected for bestowal, just as the properties of physical light are, in part, a function of the particular wavelength of the sort of light being considered.

The nature and quality of ‘iman’ varies with the context in which it is rooted or immersed. ‘Iman’ in the context of Divinity is different -- though, obviously, not unrelated -- from ‘iman’ in the context of angels, scriptures, prophets, the Last Day, or the apportioning of all things, whether good or evil.

In each instance, the light of faith is a degree of knowledge that carries ‘something’ (in the form of understanding) of the character or nature of the kind of ‘reality’ in question. Each context of faith has its own spectrum of light radiating degrees of knowledge and understanding appropriate to that spectrum.

Conversely, just as the light of faith gives expression to degrees of knowledge, so, too, the darkness that is manifested through a lack of faith gives expression to degrees of ignorance. The Qur’an says: “Or, (the unbelievers state) is like the depth of darkness in a vast, deep, ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by dark clouds: depths of darkness, one above another. If a man stretches out his hand, he can barely see it. For any whom Allah gives no light, there is no light!” (24:40)

The author mentions another Hadith of the Prophet that indicates that ‘faith’: “is to acknowledge with the heart, to voice with the tongue, and

to act with the limbs.” The author goes on to contend that this Hadith suggests human beings consist of “three domains ranked in a clear hierarchy” and that each of these domains came to be “studied by different disciplines and judged by different standards”.

Oftentimes, disciplines of study arise and take on a life of their own such that the ‘reality’ of that in relation to which the discipline originally might have arisen, as a human form of response, becomes less important than the protocols, methods, assumptions, and biases of the discipline in question. Similarly, the various standards that different disciplines employ in order to pass and impose judgments often tend to be more a reflection of a given discipline’s historical battles and struggles than they are a reflection of the ‘reality’ with which a discipline supposedly is preoccupied.

The nature of faith, as described by the Prophet, does not suggest, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends, that the human being consists of “three domains ranked in clear hierarchy”. The author is imposing his own conceptual schema onto the Hadith.

Faith is a light with unified properties. When this light is present, it is given expression through what is said, what is done, and what has been ‘acknowledged’ by the heart as true, in accordance with the degree of knowledge that is inherent in such an instance of faith.

At any given moment, there can be faith without speech or action, but there cannot be faith without the light of God that has established or cast faith into the heart of an individual. When this faith is present, then, at any given juncture in time, the individual blessed in this way is oriented or predisposed toward speaking, acting, and understanding in accordance with the quality of that faith. Alternatively, if, when appropriate to do so, a person is not prepared to speak and/or act, or understand in accordance with the illumination of this light of faith, then, either the light of faith is not actually present or it is in danger of being lost.

The author is rendering the words of the Prophet as if the latter were providing a definition. Instead, the Prophet is offering three tests for determining the presence of faith.

Faith is not speech, per se, for many people speak without having faith. Faith is not actions, per se, for many people act out of intentions that are rooted in other than faith. Faith is not just any kind of acknowledgment of the heart, per se, because the heart is capable of being both guided as

well as being misled depending on whether spirit or the carnal soul (or the world or Iblis) has the most influence on the heart. Nor, is faith a combination of speech, acts, and acknowledgment, per se, since all three of these can come together in ways from which faith is absent.

The Prophet knew all this, so, presumably, he was not engaged in an exercise of definition when he spoke of faith in relation to speech, acts and acknowledgment. He was not saying that the word 'faith' is semantically equivalent to 'speech plus acts plus acknowledgment' - rather, he was saying something else.

Faith is present when speech, actions, and/or the heart reflect the light of that faith and give expression to the presence of the light of that faith in appropriate ways and at appropriate times. If speech, acts, or understanding -- which are oriented in accordance with the degree of knowledge of a given instance of faith -- are not given expression at appropriate times or in appropriate ways, then faith, in all probability, is not present.

When faith is present, one will observe (in oneself or others) certain conditions of speech and/or acts and/or knowledge/understanding being satisfied. If one does not observe the fulfillment of such conditions, then, faith is not likely to be present, or faith might be present but could be at risk of departing in the event ones speech, acts and understanding continue to work at cross purposes to, or in denial of, the presence of this light.

The author has translated one test of the presence of faith by the word "acknowledge". That is, the heart 'acknowledges' the presence of a certain kind of light of faith within the heart.

Other people have translated the central, operative factor with respect to this aspect of what the Prophet said in other ways. For example, some people talk in terms of a process of 'verification' within the heart concerning the presence of faith.

"Verification" is a somewhat stronger and more rigorous term than is "acknowledgment". Be this as it may, whether there is a process of 'verification' or a process of 'acknowledgment', the heart needs to take a certain stance of affirmation concerning the presence of this special kind of light.

In order to affirm something with the heart, the heart must be receptive to what is being affirmed. This means that 'faith' -- at least as approached by the Sufi path -- is not a matter of a conviction, of some kind,

attaching to an object of faith (e.g., God, angels, scriptures, prophets, the Last Day, etc.).

Rather, faith is, as indicated above, a process of being open to the light of God that is being 'cast, or has been cast, into the heart'. In addition, faith is being open or receptive to the 'Source' from which this light comes such that the individual of faith becomes sensitized to, or attentive toward, or ready for, the possibility of receiving whatever additional emanations might come from that Source, just as fertile ground is receptive to, and 'prepared to work with', any seed that might be planted therein.

The Source of the lights of faith is always God. However, God chooses whatever loci of manifestation Divinity likes for the pathways through which such lights reach the heart of an individual.

On the Sufi path there is a special kind of 'receptivity' or 'openness' or 'inclination' concerning the lights of faith arising from the Source. This modality of openness is known as 'nisbath'.

Nisbath is a capacity for, and a process of, recognizing, and being open to, the light of God irrespective of the medium or locus through which this light might arrive. However, nisbath is particularly attuned to the reception of the lights of faith when such lights are manifested through the locus of the shaykh, guide, or teacher.

The stronger an individual's nisbath is, the more attuned, sensitive, and open is the being of that individual toward the lights of faith that might be cast, by God, into the inner sanctum of the individual's heart through the teachings, example, and being of the teacher or shaykh. The weaker an individual's nisbath is, the less attuned, sensitive, or open is the being of that person toward the lights of faith that might be cast, by God, into the person's heart through the locus of manifestation of the teacher.

To be open and to remain open to the lights of faith is a struggle. One aspect of this struggle revolves around the presence of doubt concerning the lights that are being received or have been received by the heart.

The lights of faith not only consist of knowledge of a given degree and variety, but one of the effects of these lights of faith is to dampen, dispel, or modulate doubts in the heart of the individual through the very nature and presence of their luminosity. Nonetheless, doubts tend to persist because just as we have a capacity of openness to the lights of faith, there also is, within all of us, a capacity for closing ourselves off to the lights of faith,

and one of the ways of becoming closed, or disinclined to be receptive, to the lights of faith is through the nafs or carnal soul within us that both generates doubts, as well as, is receptive to doubts from other sources such as the activities of the mind, Satanic suggestion, or the influences of the world.

On the Sufi path, nisbath is one of the primary means of combating doubts. Through nisbath, the individual aligns, and is helped to align, herself or himself with the teacher or shaykh in such a way that preference is given to the lights of faith being manifested, by the Grace of God, through the locus of the teacher rather than to the streams of doubt that are being generated within, as well as received by, the individual from various sources.

The greater this preference is, the stronger nisbath is. This enhanced preference serves to strengthen the struggle against, among other things, the tendency of doubts to attack and attempt to undermine the lights of faith in the heart.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, “acknowledging with the heart’ is to recognize the truth and reality of faith’s objects in the deepest realm of human awareness. The ‘heart’ in Koranic terms is the center of life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality. The heart is aware and conscious before the mind articulates thought, just as it is alive before the body acts. Faith’s inmost core is found only in the heart”.

While one could agree with the author’s contention that: “faith’s inmost core is found only in the heart”, the author fails to note that there is more than one level of capacity for the process of acknowledging or recognizing the truth and reality inherent in the lights of faith. Indeed, the ‘heart’, considered as a whole, has an array of modalities for being receptive to the knowledge that is being transmitted through the lights of faith.

For example, at one end of the aforementioned array of possibilities inherent in the heart, considered as a whole, is the ‘breast’. The ‘breast’ is a capacity or potential within the heart for turning and being open to influences from different sources.

When this breast-capacity is turned in the direction of the nafs or carnal soul, the heart tends to be receptive to influences from the nafs, body, mind, world, and the satanic realm. When, on the other hand, the breast-capacity of the

heart is turned in the direction of 'ruh' or spirit, then, the heart tends to be receptive to influences from the realms of the spirit, the angels, scriptures, the prophetic tradition, and, of course, the Divine.

Another capacity or potential inherent in the heart is the 'fo'ad'. The 'fo'ad', like the 'breast', is mentioned in the Qur'an.

Whereas the breast, when properly aligned, can acknowledge the presence of the light of faith in the heart, the dimension of the heart known as 'fo'ad' can 'see' what only can be acknowledged by the breast. This quality of 'seeing' is much more akin to the previously mentioned process of 'verification' that some people have used to translate that portion of the Hadith describing how faith is given expression not just through voicing with the tongue and action of the limbs, but also involves some sort of active embrace of the light of faith by the heart. 'Seeing' is a way of verifying that goes beyond mere acknowledgment.

There are other modalities within the heart for receiving the lights of faith besides the 'breast' and the 'fo'ad'. These other modes of receptivity and openness to the lights of faith have their own unique characteristics and qualities that involve much more intense, rigorous, and comprehensive capabilities than the sort of 'acknowledgment' that the author uses to translate the Hadith concerning three ways through which faith can be manifested.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does allude to these other modalities when he stipulates that: " 'acknowledging with the heart' is to recognize the truth and reality of faith's objects in the deepest realm of human awareness". Nevertheless, by only alluding to such modalities, the author misses an opportunity to show how recognition of the truth and reality inherent in the lights of faith is a multi-faceted and/or multi-staged process, and, therefore, by so doing, indicate how different people might engage the lights of faith in a way that reflects which modalities of openness and receptivity might be active in any given instance -- a way that gives expression to different degrees and depths of knowledge and certainty concerning the lights of faith from individual to individual.

In addition, when the author states that the "heart' in Koranic terms is the center of life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality", he is saying something that is both true and, yet, in need of qualification. The Qur'an also mentions 'ruh' (the spirit), the 'sirr' (the mystery), the 'kafi' (the hidden) and the 'aqfah' (the more hidden).

As such, although the heart is one of the primary centers of “life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality”, it is not the only center with the potential or capacity for, among other qualities, “life, consciousness, intelligence, and intentionality.” ‘Fitra’, or primordial disposition, encompasses all of these other capacities or centers, as well as the heart, and only when all of these differing, but complementary, capacities are realized, can the potential and purpose of ‘fitra’ be fulfilled. Consequently, as important as the heart is, it does not necessarily mark the end of spiritual possibilities.

Of course, someone might stipulate that the heart is equivalent to the essence of the human being and, therefore, encompasses all facets of spiritual potential. From this sort of perspective, the heart would contain the ‘sirr’, the ‘ruh’, the ‘kafi’, and the ‘aqfah’ as different dimensions of heart-knowledge, and, therefore, collectively would constitute the fitra or primordial disposition of human beings.

However, this sort of approach neither seems to reflect the structure of the human being outlined in the Qur’an, nor does it appear to reflect the descriptions of those shaykhs who have spent some time delineating the metaphysical (i.e., that which is beyond the physical) character of human, spiritual nature.

Alternatively, there have been descriptions of the inner realms of human potential that have been expressed entirely in terms of ‘nafs’, where ‘nafs’ is construed as a complex ‘self’ or ‘soul’ consisting of various dimensions that bear upon issues of spirituality or the mystical path. For example, one framework of this kind depicts the ‘nafs’ as harboring seven potentials.

More specifically, these are said to be: (1) al-nafs al-amaara, or the domineering self; (2) al-nafs al-lavvaama, or the censorious self; (3) al-nafs al-mulbima, or the inspiring self; (4) al-nafs al-mutma’inna, or the tranquil self; (5) al-nafs al-raathziya, or the contented self; (6) al-nafs al-marthzeeya, or the pleasing self, and (7) al-nafs al-saafiya, or the pure self. Each of these is rooted in, or referenced by, particular verses of the Qur’an.

The first three expressions of nafs noted above are said to be indicative of an ‘ordinary’, average person’s general array of inclinations. Individuals characterized in this fashion would be people who exhibit various combinations of: bodily/emotional appetites (i.e., 1), conscience (i.e., 2), and a limited degree of spiritual aspirations (i.e., 3).

The second group of dimensions inherent in nafs (4 -6) reflect qualities of the spiritual elite. Those who, by the Grace of God, have struggled through to these 'elite' facets of spiritual potential would have started out, as all human beings do, by being enveloped in the first three facets of 'nafs', outlined in the preceding paragraph, before moving on to ensuing dimensions of nafs through sincere commitment to traversing the stages, states, stations, rigors, and challenges within these elite spiritual possibilities inherent in the deeper 'realms' of 'nafs'.

According to the framework being outlined here, the 'pure self' (i.e., 7) constitutes the deepest spiritual dimension of the 'nafs'. Only the elite of the spiritual elite exhibit the qualities of this facet of the 'self' or 'soul'.

Irrespective of the terminology that is used (e.g., nafs, heart, or fitra), reference is being given to the complex spiritual nature of human beings. One might subsume spiritual potentials such as 'sirr' (the mystery), 'ruh' (the spirit), 'kafi' (the hidden), and 'aqfah' (the most hidden) under one, or another, facet of nafs, the heart, or fitra, but all of these arrangements are merely ways of organizing and providing a means of referring, in conceptual/linguistic terms, to that which God has molded into human spiritual potential.

In other words, language and concepts, no matter how organized and arranged, cannot serve as substitutes for the realm of experience. In order to understand what is being referred to, one must taste and imbibe the realities in question, and when one does, these conceptual frameworks fade in importance and even relevance.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that "voicing with the tongue is the realm of expressing faith through articulated self-awareness, or rational speech. Human beings are differentiated from other animals precisely by their power of speech, which expresses and conveys the awareness hidden in the depths of the heart."

The power of speech might, or might not, be a faculty that human beings have that is not shared, at least to some degree, by other animals. Certainly, whales and dolphins might represent exceptions to the authors claim, and there are many other species of animals (ranging from insects to gorillas) who appear to exhibit powers of communication even if they do not have the specific capacity to articulate speech enjoyed by human beings.

Whatever the truth of the foregoing matters might be, one might disagree with the author when he maintains that “human beings are differentiated from other animals precisely by their power of speech”. In fact, the appearance of such a claim in the context of a discussion of spiritual potential seems, to say the least, rather strange, if not ironic, since the true, defining characteristic that sets humans apart from the rest of creation, and not just animals, is the spiritual potential that God has bestowed on human beings.

Moreover, the author is just plain wrong when he claims that the power of human speech “expresses and conveys the awareness hidden in the depths of the heart.” What can be expressed, even when said through the eloquence of a Rumi, Hafiz or Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah be pleased with them all), is but an extremely small subset of the ocean of awareness that is hidden in the heart, let alone in the rest of human spiritual potential.

There is a reason why the term “ineffable” is used in conjunction with the mystical or spiritual path. Most of the experiences, stations, states, conditions, understandings, and modalities of awareness of the Sufi path are completely beyond the capacity of human speech to convey.

The literary excellence of those spiritual elites who have been inspired to write, in prose or poetry, something of the beauty, majesty, and nature of the Sufi path are but allusions to a ‘reality without a name’. Their works are creative, ingenious, breath-taking signposts that are intended to point in the direction of a realm where words and concepts cannot go. Their literary efforts, in all their magnificence, are but a few, verbal crumbs left on the path by those who have journeyed to an Ocean without shores and who are inviting the rest of us, in the only way that words permit, to seek the Ocean and not be satisfied with the drops that have been left behind.

In the quoted section with which the present commentary began a number of pages ago, the author proposed that the Hadith of the Prophet that discussed faith in terms of three dimensions (i.e., the tongue, the heart, and actions) was tantamount to indicating the Prophet was suggesting, through this Hadith, that man was composed of three realms corresponding to the dimensions mentioned in the Hadith and parenthetically noted above. The author went on to assert that different scholarly disciplines arose in response to each of these dimensions.

For example, the author said: “Acting with the limbs’, or putting faith into practice, is the domain of jurisprudence. It is here that people ‘submit’ to God’s will by obeying the commands set down in the Sharia.” Without wishing to discount the fact that one of the ways in which faith is put into practice is through the physical actions that are the subject matter of jurisprudence or Shari’ah, nevertheless, this is a very limited and misleading way of characterizing what the Prophet was alluding to in the Hadith at issue.

Kindness, generosity, humility, love, patience, forbearance, courage, sincerity, understanding, and ihsan -- to name but a few qualities -- are not within the jurisdiction of Shari’ah -- at least when conceived, as it generally is, as a discipline governing exoteric requirements associated with Deen. All of the foregoing qualities, however, are, to varying degrees, within the purview of faith, as well as other, deeper dimensions of spirituality, and usually are given expression, in a multiplicity of forms, through actions of the limbs.

It seems rather odd in the context of a discussion of the Sufi path that the author would limit the scope of his remarks at this point to maintaining that what the Prophet meant by “actions of the limbs” pertained only to the Shari’ah --as important and relevant as this facet of Islam might be. In truth, and as suggested above, faith extends far beyond the basic requirements of Shari’ah as normally understood, without excluding any of these requirements.

One could observe, to varying degrees, the basic pillars of Islam, as well as acknowledge, to some minimally acceptable extent, articles of faith involving: God, the angels, scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and the measured apportionment of everything (both good and ‘evil’), and, yet, still be relatively devoid of kindness, generosity, courage, sincerity, patience, love, forgiveness, and so on. There is nothing within Shari’ah -- as usually understood -- which stipulates that a person who is not patient or generous has violated a rule of jurisprudence for which there are prescribed forms of relief that can be sought, by individuals or the community, through Shari’ah courts.

On the other hand, to say an individual is a person of iman or faith, but is devoid of kindness, love, mercy, compassion, and so on, is something of an oxymoron or contradiction in terms. The Prophet Muhammad (peace

be upon him) is reported to have said: “Kindness is a mark of faith, and whoever has not kindness, has not faith.”

Indeed, one of the most appealing, magnetic features of people of abiding and deep faith revolves around the fact that their faith is radiantly manifested through their limbs by means of acts of generosity or forbearance or numerous other luminous qualities of character that affect the hearts of those who witness and/or who are the beneficiary of such acts and, yet, are acts that are not obligatory under Shari‘ah. In short, faith impels these acts, not Shari‘ah -- at least, not the exoteric aspects of the latter.

## 16 - Shahadah

Pages 7 and 8 - Chapter One: “In this brief outline of the basics of Islam, it is important to notice the primary place accorded to the dual Shahadah or ‘testimony of faith’. This is to bear witness that ‘There is no god but God’ and ‘Muhammad is His messenger.’ The Shahadah provides the key to understanding the Islamic perspective in all domains.

“In the definition of ‘submission,’ the Shahadah is listed as the first required act of Muslims. By verbally acknowledging the reality of God and the prophetic role of Muhammad, one makes the other four pillars and the Sharia incumbent upon oneself.

“The Shahadah also defines the content of faith, whose primary element is faith in God. The nature of the God in whom Muslims have faith is set down briefly by the first Shahadah, while all the objects of faith are conceptualized in terms of the concomitants of the second Shahadah, which designates the domain of the message and the messenger.”

Commentary: In a sense, the Shahadah is not “the first required act of Muslims”. To begin with, Shahadah is a doorway to affirming one’s already existing status as a Muslim, irrespective of whether one was born into a Muslim family or one was born into other than a Muslim family.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Every child is born according to primordial nature (fitra)” but, then, our parents might bring us up in accordance with this or that tradition. Moreover, even if the family into which an individual is born might be nominally Muslim or might consider themselves Muslim, this fact, in and of itself, does not necessarily mean the parents or family of such a child will be rooted-- either in terms of practice, understanding, or faith -- in the Islamic tradition that is actually taught through the Qur’an or the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Prophet is reported to have indicated there were 71 sects of Jews, but only one of these would be on the right path. In addition, he is reported to have said there were 72 sects of Christians, but only one of these would be on the right path. Finally, he also is reported to have stated there would be 73 sects of Muslims, but only one of these would be on the right path.

To say Shahadah is not enough. This act presupposes some minimal degree of understanding concerning the nature of that in relation to which Shahadah is being said.

To say Shahadah, is to give expression to a realization of one's need to seek discernment concerning the truth of 'what is', as well as, 'where', 'how', and 'why' we fit into this 'what is'. To say Shahadah, is the opening salvo of a life-long struggle to differentiate the one right way among the 73 possible paths (72 of which are problematic) to which the Prophet was alluding in the foregoing Hadith. The Qur'an states: "Each one does according to one's rule of conduct, and thy Lord is best aware of the one whose way is right." (17:84)

The Qur'an describes the 'time' in pre-eternity in which Allah addressed the spirits and asked them: "Am I not your Lord?" According to the Qur'an, we all answered "Yes". (7:172) However, since the 'time' of that answer, the understanding inherent in our response has become lost within ourselves as we made the transition from the realm of pre-eternity to the realm of earthly existence.

By saying Shahadah, one gives expression to a recognition or acknowledgment -- on some level -- of a need to work toward realizing all that is entailed by both the Quranic question: "Am I not your Lord?" and our original answer: "Yes". In effect, the Shahadah is the gateway back to our origins for it contains, in its depths, both the question and answer of pre-eternity.

To say Shahadah, is not "the first required act of Muslims". Shahadah is the vehicle, so to speak, through which one engages the journey of discovery concerning not only what it means to be Muslim, but what being Muslim has to do with our primordial nature or 'fitra', and as such, Shahadah is the ship on which one sets sail.

However, before one can embark on such a voyage, one must understand -- in some minimal fashion -- that there is a need for both the voyage and a ship. As such, understanding, of some kind, precedes the act of Shahadah, and the latter is a way of formally acknowledging the former -- otherwise, Shahadah becomes just a mindless, heartless, spiritless, empty, speech act.

To say Shahadah, is to recognize the need for a mode of transportation in order to arrive at where we want to go -- which is the end

of the line concerning the nature of reality, together with the truth about who and why we are. This means the attestation of Shahadah is not so much the first required act of a Muslim, as much as it is an admission that one can't get 'there' (i.e., back to the knowledge and understanding of our original condition in pre-eternity) from 'here'(our current condition of spiritual ignorance and being veiled) without assistance.

In short, the sense in which the word "required" can be applied to the Shahadah is as an acknowledgment of needing some sort of means of transporting us from ignorance to knowledge, or from darkness to light, or from being veiled to being unveiled, or from potential to realization. There is no element here of an obligation being imposed on human beings and to suggest otherwise is problematic in a variety of ways.

In fact, the language of the Qur'an in this regard does not speak of 'obligation' but speaks, instead, in terms of 'amana' or 'trust'. As the Qur'an indicates, a "Trust" was offered to the heavens and mountains and earth, but they all refused, being afraid with respect to the offer. Yet, human beings accepted this offer and have, in all too many cases, proven themselves to be fools and tyrants concerning their response to, or handling of, the Trust (33:72).

This offer was not imposed upon, or made obligatory on, human beings. An opportunity was offered, and human beings accepted.

The Qur'an does indicate that trusts should be returned to the owner or owners of such trusts (4:58) as a basic principle of etiquette, morality, justice, or adab. Indeed, irrespective of spiritual tradition, philosophical stance, or political persuasion, there does seem to be an inherent dimension within human beings concerning the basic injustice or inappropriateness of keeping something to which one does not have a fundamental right.

However, this makes acceptance of the Trust a matter of fiduciary responsibility on behalf of the One Who is extending the trust and not a matter of an obligation and requirement that has been imposed independently of what human beings have agreed to accept on their own. In other words, once a human being has accepted the offer of the 'trust', then, there is a 'duty of care' associated with this acceptance, but this 'duty of care' arises entirely as a matter of responsibility of that to which the individual has stipulated in accepting the offer and not as a matter of what has been imposed on the individual by the One Who has extended the offer or Trust.

The “damages” that ensue if an individual does not fulfill the fiduciary responsibilities or duty of care associated with the ‘accepting’ of the offer of the Trust will accrue to the one who has failed to live up to the responsibilities of acceptance. The One Who offered the Trust sustains no damages because the whole idea behind the offering of the Trust, to begin with, was in order to benefit the individual who accepted the offer.

The offer is an opportunity. It is not a requirement for anything except that once accepted, if an individual wishes to realize the possibilities inherent in the opportunity, then, there are ways that can assist one to actualize the potential of the offer or Trust.

In this context, spiritual guidance (whether through Revelation, a Prophetic mission, the teachings of any of the friends of God, or one’s own spiritual progress) is for the purpose of supporting an individual’s efforts to adhere to the requirements of the fiduciary responsibilities that the individual assumed by accepting the offer in the first place. The Qur’an stipulates there is no compulsion in matters of Deen (2:256), and the fiduciary responsibilities surrounding the offering of the Trust are all entailed by Deen since Deen is the ‘way’ through which the potential of fitra is realized.

Fitra, or primordial nature, is the opportunity. Fitra is grounded in the Trust being offered. By realizing the potential of fitra, one is returning the Trust to its Owner.

What is this Trust? It is rooted in the reason underlying Creation-- that is, as is recorded in a Hadith Qudsi (in which Divinity speaks through the Prophet Muhammad -- peace be upon him): “I (Divinity) was a Hidden Treasure and desired (or loved) to be known, so I (Divinity) brought forth Creation.”

The Trust concerns the possibility of a specific way of knowing the ‘Hidden Treasure’. More specifically, all facets of Creation fulfill the purpose of the original desire of Divinity merely through their being and giving expression to manifest knowledge of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ by virtue of the nature inherent in different modalities of created being. But, the opportunities vested in the Trust are about coming to know something of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ with respect to what is at the heart of the innermost dimension of the original Divine Desire or Himma (Aspiration).

We struggle toward this to our own benefit and not to the benefit of Divinity. Moreover, to the extent we neglect this opportunity that was set in motion by acceptance of the Trust, then, we will be the losers, not Divinity-- in either case we shall meet with our Lord: "O mankind! Surely you are ever toiling on towards your Lord -- painfully toiling, but you shall meet Him." (84:6)

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* makes a common mistake when he refers to the first Shahadah as the "testimony of faith". Bearing witness, which is the focus of the first Shahadah, is not the same as a 'testimony of faith' which is the focus of the first declaration of 'iman'.

If this were not so, then, there really would be no need for two attestations -- one concerning 'islam' and one giving expression to 'iman'. If this were not so, then, there would be no reason for the Prophet to be instructed, through revelation, to tell the bedouins, who had come to him proclaiming belief in God and His Messenger, to say, instead, that they submit, for belief had not, yet, entered their hearts. If this were not so, there would be no need to distinguish between 'islam' and 'iman'. That which is being attested to in relation to 'submission' and 'faith', respectively, involves a different kind and level of affirmation in each instance.

The Qur'an informs us there can be no compulsion in matters of Deen. Given this Quranic principle, then, 'the first required act of Muslims' cannot be Shahadah if one is construing "required" to mean that which has been made obligatory upon, and is being imposed on, human beings since this would be in violation of the spirit of non - compulsion which is at the heart of the Quranic message.

All of life is a matter of choice. We choose to our benefit, and we choose to our detriment.

'Guidance', whether given through the Qur'an or the Sunnah (actions) of the Prophet or through the teachings of a shaykh or through one's own inner unveiling, is not about stating what is obligatory. Guidance is preoccupied with informing us about options, possibilities, degrees of freedom, problems, and consequences in relation to the exercise of choice.

Guidance is concerned with providing help, insights, suggestions, assistance, support, advisory warnings, and so on concerning the journey of life. What we do with such guidance is up to us, but, whatever we do,

we must know that what we choose to do will either help us as individuals or hurt us as individuals.

Guidance is a manifestation of Beneficence and Compassion. It is not, nor was it ever intended to be, an onerous burden to be imposed on human beings as a litany of obligations that are required to be performed ... or ELSE!

At the same time, we neglect guidance at our own risk. However, the risk that is at issue here is not primarily a matter of the dire consequences that might ensue if heed is not given to the guidance that comes to us. Rather, the risk we run is to miss out on fulfilling the purpose of our lives, along with the concomitant realization of our own spiritual potential, and in all of this, our lives become the evidence that can be marshaled against us on the Last Day when what we have done is measured against what could have been the case had we sincerely pursued the realization of essential identity and spiritual capacity – “On the Day when their tongues, their hands, and their feet shall testify against them.” (24:24)

Unfortunately, there seems to be a ‘forced sense’ of “required” inherent in the author’s previous quote for he goes on to say the following. “By verbally acknowledging the reality of God and the prophetic role of Muhammad, one makes the other four pillars and the Sharia incumbent upon oneself”.

In truth, Shahadah need not commit one to anything beyond the affirmation that is relevant to the sort of attestation in question. Shahadah marks one stage of spiritual inclination or orientation, among many possible stages of spiritual inclination and orientation (and this is true, as well, in relation to each of the other four Pillars). To a great extent, how far any, or all, of this is pursued, is up to the individual (in terms of capacity, intention, aspiration, and circumstances), although, naturally, environment -- in the form of family, community, education, and experiential opportunities -- might also affect what, if anything, happens either in relation to, or beyond, the first Shahadah.

The individual who says Shahadah is indicating a certain willingness (which varies with the capacity, intention, aspiration, and circumstances underlying that person’s attestation) to accept as true, on some level, that ‘there is no reality but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God’. This acceptance might never carry over into the other Pillars (i.e., prayer, fasting, zakat/charity, and pilgrimage), but such

acceptance, nonetheless, could surface in a whole variety of attitudes, interests, likes, dislikes, and actions concerning that individual's existential stance with respect to the universe.

For instance, the individual who says Shahadah but who does not observe the other Pillars might be dedicated to qualities of kindness, love, compassion, justice, patience, and so on because the individual feels a harmonious resonance between these sorts of qualities and the meanings entailed by the Shahadah. If such an individual seeks to incorporate these qualities into her or his life because the individual sees these values as extensions of, or applications of, the Shahadah, then, this person is bearing witness in accordance with the spirit of the initial attestation or affirmation of God's existence and the Prophetic mission of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Prophet once said that God has three hundred attributes and if an individual were to make just one of these attributes his or hers (in the sense of being dyed in the 'colors' of that attribute), then, that person will attain Paradise. There is nothing in this Hadith about observing the other four Pillars, but one cannot approach the attributes of God on the authority of such a Hadith without acknowledging the reality inherent in the first Shahadah.

On the other hand, one should not suppose this process of seeking to make even a single attribute of God one's own area of focus and realized understanding is not without its own intense, if not severe, challenges, risks, and rigors. In fact, this road is an extremely difficult one, and an individual is likely to find that, comparatively speaking, the discipline required by observing the other four Pillars constitutes both a much easier road to travel than the former quest, as well as a way of readying oneself, if one should wish to pursue things further, for the greater rigors of the quest concerning the attributes of Divinity.

When one says, in accordance with the first Shahadah or attestation, that: "One is bearing witness to -- 'there is no reality but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God' -- to what is attestation being given? This question raises a number of other issues that must be addressed in order to gain some sense of what is being asked here.

First, let's consider the initial part of the foregoing Shahadah, namely: "there is no reality but God". What is meant when one refers to 'whatever' as "God", or, phrased in another way, what is meant when one uses the

word “God” when making reference to ‘reality’, whatever the latter might be?

In an Islamic context, one is saying something along the following lines. All levels of reality are established through, delineated by, give expression to, and serve the purpose or purposes of Divinity.

In other words, whatever possibilities exist, these exist through what Divinity permits, and there are no other possibilities besides these. Whatever laws, rules, or principles are inherent in the nature of things, then, these exist through what Divinity permits, and there are no laws, rules, or principles other than these. Whatever degrees of freedom or boundaries exist, these exist through what Divinity permits, and there are no degrees of freedom or boundaries other than these. Whatever potentials exist, these exist through what Divinity permits, and there are no potentials other than these. Whatever order exists, this exists through what Divinity permits, and there are no realms of order other than this. Whatever levels of being exist, these exist through what Divinity permits, and there are no levels of being other than this. In whatever way(s) things, events and processes unfold, this takes place through what Divinity permits, and there are no ways other than this.

To assert -- in the foregoing, broadly construed sense -- that “there is no ‘reality’ but ‘God’ ” means all truth, existence, potential, dimensions, realms, worlds, and possibility depend on, and derive their nature and being from what Divinity permits. All truth, existence, potential, possibility, and manifestation is derived or borrowed truth, existence, potential, possibility, or manifestation. God, alone, is: the source, determiner, judge, and disposer of: all truth, existence, potential, possibility, and manifestation.

To claim there is a ‘reality’ other than God is to deny the foregoing. To claim there is a ‘reality’ other than God is to maintain there are more realms of truth, order, being, reality, existence, possibility, and potential than the ones that God permits.

In truth, the Shahadah stipulates there is no reality, existence, possibility, potential, or order but Divine Reality. There is no reality outside of, or beside, Divine Reality, and the word “God” is a way of referring to this all inclusive Reality.

However, the foregoing should not be construed in a pantheistic sense in which the fabric of the universe and being is said to consist of ‘atoms’ of Divinity. Rather, the Shahadah should be seen as asserting that reality --

whatever it might be, or could be, or entails -- is what Divinity permits. 'Whatever is' has the Divine Signature of permissibility upon it and underlying it.

Divinity is that Reality which is beyond, but makes possible, all permitted realities. The Essence of Divine Reality is that Essence which is beyond, but makes possible, the essence of all permitted realities.

The relation between Divinity and the various modalities of permitting, or between the Divine Essence and the essence of permitted realities is clothed or veiled in mystery. How much of this mystery can, or will, be made available to any given individual is a function of what Divinity permits.

What about the second aspect of the Shahadah -- namely, "Muhammad is the Messenger of God"? The significance of this part of the attestation is rooted in the several levels of meaning that are inherent in the term: "Messenger".

Islam makes a distinction between "Rasul" ('Messenger') and "Nabeeh" ('Prophet'). A 'Prophet' is an individual appointed by God for the purpose of officially inviting people to, and informing them about, Deen and, as well, to provide assistance to human beings in all matters pertaining to Deen in accordance with the spiritual capacity that God has given to such an individual for just this purpose.

A 'Rasul' is a Prophet who, in addition to the role of Prophet (i.e., Nabeeh) outlined earlier, also receives a Book of Revelation from God, via the archangel Gabriel, and has the responsibility of receiving, preserving and disseminating the Message of such a Book. This Book is not necessarily a written document but has its origins in the Original Book of Deen in which all Revelations are rooted and out of which they arise as so many variations on the essential themes of the Original Book that 'stands' outside of space, time and materiality.

From the time of Adam (peace be upon him) to the time of Muhammad (peace be upon him), there have been some 124,000 Prophets. Only a small number of these Prophets (in the sense of Nabeeh) also have been a Rasul, and, therefore, carriers of a Messenger in the form of a Book.

The Qur'an has identified a number of those who have been Rasul. These include: Ibrahim (Abraham), Da'ud (David), Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus), and

Muhammad (peace be upon them all). The Qur'an also indicates that: "Surely! We have sent messengers before thee, among them are some whom We have told thee, and some of whom we did not tell thee." (40:78)

There is another sense of Messenger that all the Prophets share with one another and the rest of Creation, in general, and Muhammad (peace be upon him), in particular. Quite aside from the issue of Books of Revelation with which Rasul is normally associated, each of the Prophets gives expression to the Word of God as originally spoken by God.

The Qur'an indicates that when God wishes or desires for something to exist, Divinity merely says to a 'thing' "Be" ("kun") and it is. (16:40). Each thing that 'becomes' is a Word of God that conveys part of the totality of the Message that is transmitted through Creation considered as a whole.

The Words that are given manifested form in the lives of the Prophets have special importance and meaning. They are the bearers of the Words of Guidance that come to human beings and are intended to give concrete and delineated expression to the Message of Deen that is given through Books of Revelation.

While it is true that only certain Prophets of God are Messengers in the sense of being custodians of specific Books of Revelation transmitted via the archangel Gabriel, nonetheless, all Prophets are Messengers of God in the sense of being custodians and manifestations of the Guidance (or Word of God) that is intended to elucidate, in human terms, the meaning, significance, and value of any given Book of Revelation. The lives and being of all Prophets convey, in human terms, the basic themes of the Books of Revelation that, in turn, is the official, fixed, Divine record not only for all matters concerning, or pertaining to, principles of Deen and fitra, but also for creation on whatever level of consideration.

Messengers, in both of the foregoing senses, are the ones who have been designated by Divinity to serve as Words of Guidance. They are the human embodiments of the Word of God as voiced through the Creative command of "Kun" which gives to each, individual 'ayat' or sign of this 124,000-letter Word, both a basic, unvarying message concerning Deen/fitra, as well as a unique message that is reflected in, or manifested through, the life of a given Prophet that expresses one of the jewels of this Divine Word of Guidance taken as a whole -- "They are degrees with God." (3:163).

Messengers, in both of the previously mentioned senses, are sources of Guidance with respect to the meaning of “There is no reality but God”. Messengers, in both of the aforementioned senses, are bridges leading back to the depths of meaning inherent in the first part of the Shahadah.

It is only because of the truth inherent in “there is no reality but God” that the second half of the Shahadah is possible. It is only because of the permissions that have been invested in the second half of the Shahadah by the Reality to which the first part of the Shahadah alludes that human beings have been provided with the Guidance that is necessary to gain access, according to capacity and the blessings of Divinity, to the meaning, truth, and reality of: “There is no reality but God”.

Thus, contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (i.e., that: “The Shahadah also defines the content of faith, whose primary element is faith in God. The nature of the God in whom Muslims have faith is set down briefly by the first Shahadah, while all the objects of faith are conceptualized in terms of the concomitants of the second Shahadah, which designates the domain of the message and the messenger), the first Shahadah is not about “faith” but about a basic acknowledgment of the way ‘reality’ is (i.e., ‘there is no reality but God’) and the way or Deen (i.e., Muhammad is the Messenger of God) which ‘Reality’ has vested with permission to guide human beings to the truth of “there is no reality but God”.

The first Shahadah is both the port of disembarkation for the journey of discovery concerning the purpose and meaning of life, and, as well, the first Shahadah gives expression to the acknowledgment that one needs to book passage on a ship of Guidance in order to undertake the aforementioned journey. The issue of faith arises at subsequent junctures in the journey when, among other things, one struggles to keep from being washed overboard during the storms of life that buffet and challenge one’s original decision to acknowledge the reality and necessity of the first Shahadah.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the prototype for all Messengers in both of the foregoing senses. As one Hadith indicates: “I (Muhammad) was a Prophet when Adam (peace be upon him) was between water and clay.”

As prototype, the life and being of Muhammad (peace be upon him) gives expression to the meaning, purpose, and significance of the entire Prophetic

tradition. In essence, by following any of the Prophets of God, one is following the tradition of Divine Guidance that has been given voice through the lives of the Prophets and which is intended to assist human beings to struggle to pursue Deen so that the potential of fitra, or primordial nature, might be realized -- "Whoever obeys the Messenger, thereby, obeys Allah." (4:80)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has said that all of the Books of Revelation that preceded the Qur'an are contained, in essence, within the Qur'an. Similarly, the entire Prophetic tradition that preceded Muhammad (peace be upon him) is contained, in essence, within him.

If one embraces and loves any aspect of the Prophetic tradition, one necessarily embraces and loves Muhammad (peace be upon him). If one embraces and loves Muhammad (peace be upon him), one necessarily embraces and loves each facet of the Prophetic tradition.

Consequently, one cannot say the second half of the Shahadah (i.e., "Muhammad is the Messenger of God") without acknowledging, at least implicitly, the rest of the Prophetic tradition. This is so even though, in saying the second part of the Shahadah, one is mentioning only a single facet of the 124,000 member Prophetic tradition -- namely, the facet that, historically speaking, is the last manifestation of that Prophetic spiritual lineage.

The second Shahadah involves an attestation to, or recognition of, the Reality inherent in the truth that "there is no reality but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" which, in turn, is rooted in the lights of faith that have been cast into the heart of the individual by Divinity. In terms of experience, knowledge, understanding, and degree of certitude, the second Shahadah involving 'iman', extends considerably beyond the acknowledgment characteristic of the first Shahadah that is directed toward basic submission.

Just as the four Pillars of faith (daily prayers, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage) are different opportunities to give concrete expression to the truth and reality inherent in the first Shahadah of acknowledgment but do not exhaust the ways in which one can bear witness, so too, angels, Revealed Books, the Prophetic tradition, the Last Day, together with the apportioning of things, both good and evil, are so many opportunities for giving expression to lights of faith but none of these exhaust the themes through which the lights of faith can be manifested. In each case, the loci of

manifestation through which the respective declarations or witnessing might be given expression are starting points, and not termination points, of possibility.

There is a third dimension of meaning (outlined, beginning in the next paragraph) inherent in the second part (“Muhammad is the Messenger of God”) of the first Shahadah, but the reality of this level of significance (like many other aspects of the first Shahadah) only becomes realized, if at all, at a much later stage. Nonetheless, irrespective of whether, or not, the reality of this third facet of the Shahadah is realized, the general meaning that is involved can be acknowledged through attestation or bearing witness.

More specifically, there are two related Hadiths bearing upon the issue at hand. In the first Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “The first that God Almighty created was my spirit (or my light)”. In another Hadith the Prophet is reported to have said: “I am from the light of God, and the whole world is from my light”.

The light referred to in the foregoing is known as the ‘Haqiqat-i-Muhammad’ or the ‘Reality of Muhammad’. This light exists as a fixed form in the knowledge of God.

Earlier, the Quranic ayat was mentioned in which God indicates that when He desires or wishes for a ‘thing’ to be, He merely says to it “Kun” and it becomes. The ‘thing’ to which God is saying “Kun” is the fixed form of the light of that which was created first -- namely, the ‘Reality of Muhammad’.

A fixed form in the knowledge of God is a potential. It has no existence, per se, of its own, but it does have a ‘form’ in the sense of consisting of an array of possible degrees of freedom, as well as constraints or limitations.

When God says “Kun” to this fixed form in His knowledge, one kind of light (i.e., the light of Divine intent that is given expression through “Kun”) is being cast through a another kind of light (the light of potential inherent in the fixed form of the ‘Reality of Muhammad’). The result is ‘created being’ which is a complex light that is dispersed according to the way the Divine “Kun” passes through the fixed form.

This is somewhat akin to the way light from some source is dispersed when it goes through a prism and, as a result, generates a spectrum that is a function of both the nature of the prism through which the

original light had been cast, together with the properties of the latter light. In the present case, however, the spectrum that arises gives expression to the manifestations of creation.

All creation bears a signature from the light of the fixed form through which “Kun” has passed. All creation is inherent in the potential of the fixed form of Divine knowledge that constitutes the ‘Reality of Muhammad’ - a potential that awaits the directive “Kun” so that a spectrum of creation arises in accordance with the way that “potential” is affected by the Divine command.

This potential always remains just that -- ‘a potential’. The Creation which arises is the light of Divinity that has been dispersed in a particular way by the potential through which the Divine “Kun” has passed -- a dispersal that has the properties that Divinity originally desired by virtue of the intent that gave rise to “Kun”. “Kun” addressed the appropriate facet(s) of the ‘Reality of Muhammad’ to generate the manifested form of dispersal that is known as ‘created being -- indeed, as the Qur’an indicates -- “God is the Light of the heavens and earth” (24:35).

The Message of “Kun” is Creation. The Messenger of this Message of Creation that arises out of the Divine Word “Kun” is the light of the fixed form potential, known as the ‘Reality of Muhammad’, through which the Command of “Kun” passes.

In light of the foregoing, the first Shahadah signifies the following. “There is no one but God who gives the Command of “Kun”, and the ‘Reality of Muhammad’ is the Messenger of the Divine Message of “Kun”.

### 17- Tower of Babel

Page 8 - Chapter One : “All three dimensions of Islam have been present wherever there have been Muslims. People cannot take their religion seriously without engaging their bodies, their minds, and their hearts; or their activity, their thinking, and their being. But these dimensions became historically differentiated in many forms, the diversity of which has all sorts of causes, about which historians have written no end of books. After all, we are talking about how Muslims practice their religion, how they conceptualize their faith and their understanding of things, and how they express their quest to be near to God. We are talking about various branches of Islamic law and institutions of government, diverse schools of thought investigating the nature of God and the human soul, and multifarious organizations that guide people on the path of spiritual aspiration and give focus to their vastly different experiences of God’s presence.

“These diverse expressions of Islam, which have undergone tremendous historical and regional variation, have been given many names over Islamic history. The whole situation has become much more complex because of the investigations of modern scholars, who have had their own programs, agendas, and goals and who have employed diverse interpretive schemes in their attempts to make sense of Islamic history in contemporary terms.”

Commentary: While it is clear that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is “talking about how Muslims practice their religion, how they conceptualize their faith and their understanding of things, and how they express their quest to be near to God”, it is not at all clear that talking about these things is going to get one any closer to the ‘reality without a name’. In fact, the author has created something of a ‘Tower of Babel’ by referring and/or alluding to all of the diverse ways in which Muslims from different historical periods and geographical regions have constructed institutions, schools, and so on, for the purpose of propagating their particular interpretations of Islam. In addition, the author notes how further confusion is added to this quest for understanding by modern scholars who have their own agendas, biases, and interests to impose upon Islam.

According to the author, such diversity exists because of the “vastly different experiences of God’s presence” that is reflected in all of the accounts and institutions that have been generated, both currently, as well as

in the past. However, there are a number of questions that might be raised concerning the author's method of setting the stage for subsequent discussion.

For example, one can agree with the author when he states that modern scholars have "their own programs, agendas, and goals" that employ "diverse interpretive schemes in" these scholars' "attempts to make sense of Islamic history in contemporary terms". The question that needs to be asked, however, is why bother bringing modern scholars into the picture at all?

The 'reality without a name' existed before modern scholars came along. Knowledge concerning the 'reality without a name' has been transmitted from generation to generation quite independently of the scholars. Furthermore, the 'reality without a name' still exists today far beyond the horizons of the books, papers, articles, and classes that are produced by the modern scholars.

If a person wants to find out about the 'reality without a name', one might make better progress if one were not to ask an academic scholar anything about this issue. Instead, one has a far better likelihood of learning something of real value in this respect if one stays far removed from the hallowed halls of academia and goes in search of individuals who actually know something, first hand, of the 'reality without a name' -- although occasionally ... very occasionally ... one might come across a modern scholar who also happens to be on intimate terms with the 'reality without a name'.

With a few notable exceptions, the biggest contribution of modern scholars to this area of inquiry is confusion. This is so because most of these scholars are quite confused themselves about the nature of the 'reality without a name' since they have never undertaken the quest to find the Source of this 'reality' nor have they imbibed anything of its 'taste'.

Similarly, what Muslims do or think or feel does not necessarily have anything to do with the 'reality without a name'. The criterion of relevance in this regard depends not only on whether, or not, a given Muslim has apprenticed for an extended period of time under the direction and assistance of a qualified Sufi shaykh, but it also depends on whether such an individual has learned anything of value during this period of apprenticeship.

When the author speaks of the "vastly different experiences of God's presence" that feed the diversity of interpretations by Muslims or modern scholars, he is making an assumption. More specifically, while it is true to

say that God is always present and, therefore, whatever experiences one has are an engagement of that Divine presence, it does not follow that all understandings of this engagement process are of equal value or equally insightful with respect to helping one to become properly oriented toward the 'reality without a name'.

Consequently, the fact there are, and have been, "vastly different experiences of God's presence" is, in and of itself, irrelevant as far as coming to understand the nature of the 'reality without a name' is concerned. Yet, the author is referring to all of this diversity of experience under several possible assumptions -- and which assumption is operative is not made clear by the author and, paradoxically, both assumptions might be at work simultaneously.

On the one hand, there are indications in the writing of the author that sifting through these "vastly different experiences of God's presence", in the hopes of finding some glimpse of the 'reality without a name', might be worthwhile, in some sense. On the other hand, the author also seems to indicate, from time to time, that examining and analyzing these 'vastly different experiences' only will serve to bog one down, hopelessly, in a quagmire of conflicting opinions.

Whichever assumption might be operative, one needs to ask what kinds of forces were, and are, filtering these "vastly different experiences of God's presence"? The "nafs" or carnal soul, various kinds of conceptual/theoretical systems, political and social movements, Satanic suggestions, as well as 'dunya' (the ways in which we become entangled with the world of everyday experience through our desires, appetites, motivations, and emotions) can all serve as filters that color, shape, alter, and veil experience so that one has an extremely distorted understanding of the nature of God's presence in one's life.

The author unnecessarily confuses matters by mentioning all of these diverse points of view. What has happened, or has been written, or has been constructed -- historically, or in the present -- is irrelevant unless the mode of investigation at issue (then or now) is (or was) conducted under the watchful eye and heart of a sincere participant in the 'reality without a name'. Everything else is hearsay and/or vulnerable to the many forces that actively seek to undermine learning the truth about, or stepping onto, the Sufi path.

The nature of God's presence can only be understood through the faculties within the individual that have been deposited, by Divinity, into the 'fitra' (or original primordial spiritual potential) of that person for precisely such a purpose. These 'faculties' include: the heart, the sirr (mystery), the ruh (spirit), the 'ka'fi' (the hidden), and the 'aqfah' (the more hidden). Moreover, all of these faculties must be brought on line, so to speak, and must be working properly, and in concert with one another, for the individual's experience of the presence of God to provide useful insights concerning the nature of the 'reality without a name'.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* might have said something along the foregoing lines, but, unfortunately, he didn't. Instead, a reader of his book is likely to be left, at this juncture, with an impression that little but confusion, differences of opinion, biases, and sundry interpretations presently permeate, and have -- in the past -- characterized, the study of, and search for, the 'reality without a name'.

There is, of course, a certain truth underlying the impression that the author has created since many of those who have written about the 'reality without a name' didn't (or don't) know, as pointed out earlier, what they were (are) talking about, and, therefore, one should not be surprised that a tremendously diverse body of interpretive literature should have arisen from people who were (or are) themselves either ignorant of, or confused about, the 'reality without a name'. The foregoing truth notwithstanding, the author made a mistake by not clearly stating that this diverse, incredibly large body of interpretive literature (both historical and contemporary) has, for the most part (and there are exceptions to this general principle), nothing to do with the 'reality without a name'.

## 18 - Perfection

Page 9 - Chapter One: “As Islam gradually assumed its specific historical forms through the codification of various teachings and practices and the establishment of social institutions, the three dimensions designated by the Hadith of Gabriel came to be reflected within society as relatively distinct, though thoroughly interrelated, aspects of Islamic civilization. However, doing the beautiful remained an intangible inner sanctum. On the individual level, this third dimension has been found in the heart of all Muslims who practice their religion for God’s sake alone. In the social sphere it has been given its clearest expression in the life of those whom I would like to call the “Sufi,” even though many who claimed this label for themselves did not live up to the ideal, and many who did in fact live up to it did not want the name.

“Sufism in this understanding can be viewed as an invisible spiritual presence that animates all authentic expressions of Islam. The various historical forms in which it has appeared serve to demonstrate that this dimension of religion has remained an ideal of fundamental importance. Nonetheless, the difficulty of achieving human perfection has meant that the individuals and institutions historically connected with the name cannot necessarily be held up as expressions of Sufism’s true nature. The Sufis themselves have always been aware of the dangers of degeneration and corruption inherent in attempting to adapt social institutions to ideals that can only be fully actualized by rare individuals. When Bushanji said that Sufism is now a name without a reality, he was referring to these inadequate attempts to codify and institutionalize the heart of the tradition.”

Commentary: Islam never assumed -- “gradually” or otherwise -- “specific historical forms through the codification of various teachings and practices and the establishment of social institutions”. Islam is an expression of the Deen that God gave as a gift rather than an expression of what Muslims did to, or with, that offering.

The author -- like many other authors -- has a tendency to conflate Islam with the activities of Muslims, but the two realms are not coextensive. Historical forms, codifications, and social institutions are products of the interests, inclinations, preoccupations, agendas, understandings, motivations, and problems faced by various Muslims in the context of certain historical circumstances. Islam is the way or path provided by

Divinity for realizing different dimensions of human spiritual potential that are rooted in 'fitra'.

In fact, the relation between Islam and Muslim activities is, perhaps, best understood through the term "palimpsest". A 'palimpsest' is a parchment or surface of some kind that has been written on, or painted on, a number of times such that the initial message of the original surface has been either wholly or partially hidden from view.

Muslims have done many things and called what they have done "Islam". In truth, in all too many cases, these Muslim activities are nothing more than a writing or painting over of the original message of Divine Guidance concerning Deen and fitra.

Down through the fourteen-plus centuries since the passing away of the Prophet, there have been so many layers of Muslim activities that have been applied to the original message that the nature of Deen, fitra, and the purpose of life have been obliterated, to a very great extent, from awareness. The original message has been covered up with the products of political, social, educational, cultural, scientific, literary, artistic, economic, and legal movements or constructions.

Islamic civilization is entirely focused on the spiritual lives and teachings of the Prophets, together with the Books of Divine Revelation sent to a relatively small subset of the entire Prophetic lineage. Islamic civilization is rooted in the lives of all those who devoted themselves -- body, heart, and soul -- to realizing, within themselves, the truths manifested through the lives, teachings, and Books of Revelation of the Prophetic lineage. Islamic civilization is only about Deen, fitra, and realizing the purpose of life.

Muslim civilization, unfortunately, is scattered in many other directions. To be sure, from time to time, some small facet of Islamic civilization might be lifted out of its original context and used in relation to purposes that serve this or that Muslim interest, agenda, or movement, but such "appropriations" are just another aspect of the 'palimpsest phenomenon', alluded to earlier, in which the original message of Islam gets covered over by other kinds of Muslim activities.

In the quote with which the present commentary begins, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* refers to the Sufi path as: 'doing the beautiful', and, then, he proceeds to offer a series of characterizations of the Sufi path that are, supposedly, somehow equivalent to, or entailed by, this process

of 'doing the beautiful'. For instance, at various junctures in the above mentioned quotation, he refers to the Sufi path as: 'an invisible spiritual presence that animates all authentic expressions of Islam'; 'found in the heart of all Muslims who practice their religion for God's sake alone'; 'an ideal'; and, 'achieving human perfection'. All of this is problematic.

In the 'Hadith of Gabriel' that the author cites, "ihsan" was described by the Prophet along the following lines: 'one worships God as if one could see Him and that even if one were not able to achieve this, then, the individual should know that God sees the individual.' If one accepts the author's contention that 'doing the beautiful' is a proper rendering of "ihsan", there are a number of questions that arise in relation to such a rendering.

More specifically, what is being said here? Is the Prophet saying something more than that an individual should concentrate and focus on either (a) being constantly aware that God is present during acts of worship, or (b) being constantly aware that God is aware of what one is doing during these times?

To answer this question, one has to address a number of other issues involving key words in the portion of the cited Hadith concerning 'ihsan'. These key words are: "worships", "God", "as if", "see", and "know".

What is "worship"? Does worship refer only to observing and fulfilling the basic Pillars of Islam – or, perhaps, more adequately, to observing and fulfilling the basic Pillars of Islam through the light of faith? Or, does, worship have to do both with these sorts of things, as well as other realms and dimensions of human potential?

The Qur'an indicates that everywhere one looks, there is the Face of God (2:115). Does the one who practices 'ihsan' see the Face of God everywhere she or he looks during the process of worship, and what does it mean to 'see' the Face of God?

Is "as if" one sees, different from 'seeing'? If so, in what ways are these two different, and what are the implications of such differences for the author's claim that the Sufi path is primarily about 'ihsan'?

In what sense is "know" being used? Is it a conceptual knowing? Is it the knowing of faith, and, if so, then, given there are many different levels of faith, which sort of 'faith-knowledge' is being alluded to -- any and all of

them? Or, is some other kind of knowing being referred to here that is complementary to, but different from, the knowing of faith?

Finally, is it possible someone could practice “ihsan” successfully without being Sufi or on the Sufi path? In other words, although ‘ihsan’ -- like ‘islam’ and ‘iman’ -- is accessible to, but not necessarily achieved by, the generality of Muslims, is it possible that the goal of the Sufi path is something that both includes, as well as transcends, the station or condition of ‘ihsan’?

The Prophet need not have been alluding to only one kind of process in his description or characterization of ‘ihsan’. Conceivably, many different kinds of manifestation involving: ‘worship’, ‘God’, ‘as if’, ‘see’, and ‘know’ might be entailed by, and contained within, the Prophet’s words, and, if this is the case, then, ‘ihsan’ could refer to that which is realized when some minimal level of awareness involving ‘worship’, ‘God’, ‘as if’, ‘see’, and ‘know’ is attained.

Notwithstanding the foregoing possibilities, one still might ask whether ‘ihsan’ is ‘the’ goal of the Sufi path? Or, one might ask if ‘ihsan’ is the same thing as realizing the potential of ‘fitra’? Is ‘ihsan’ equivalent to either “fana” (so-called “annihilation” in Allah) and/or “baqa” (subsistence in Allah ... there will be more on both of these terms in future commentaries)? Is ‘ihsan’ synonymous with the Sufi station of ‘love’? Is achieving ‘ihsan’ the purpose of life? If ‘ihsan’ is the ultimate station, then, where, and how, do the different levels of the heart’s potential fit in, and what about: ‘sirr’ (mystery), ‘ruh’ (spirit), ‘kafi’ (the hidden), and ‘aqfah’ (the most hidden)? Are there ways of ‘doing the beautiful’ other than ‘ihsan’?

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* not only refers to the Sufi path as a matter of ‘ihsan’ or ‘doing the beautiful’, he also suggests this ‘path’ is: “an invisible spiritual presence that animates all authentic expressions of Islam”. Saying Shahadah, observing the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying the yearly zakat, as well as going on Hajj or Pilgrimage to the sacred precincts in, and around, Mecca at least once in one’s lifetime are “all authentic expressions of Islam”, but they are not necessarily animated by “an invisible spiritual presence” known as the Sufi path.

In other words, being an authentic expression of Islam is not, in and of itself, sufficient to qualify any given act as one that might be Sufi in character. An individual must engage the Pillars of Islam from the perspective

of a Sufi oriented niyat or intention before one can say there might be a Sufi “spiritual presence that animates” such authentic expressions of Islam.

For example, an individual who observes the different Pillars with the intention of pleasing God so that the person might attain Paradise in the life to come is not approaching the Pillars of Islam from a Sufi perspective. On the other hand, an individual who engages the various Pillars without any desire for personal gain or reward but does so simply out of gratitude to, and love of God, has an intention that resonates with the nature of the Sufi path.

Different intentions, purposes, understandings, priorities, and value systems are operative in each of the above examples. Both of the foregoing individuals are exhibiting authentic expressions of Islam, but only one of these individuals is aligned with the nature of the Sufi path.

The individual who approaches Islam through a niyat of gratitude and love, rather than through an intention that seeks reward, sounds somewhat like another characterization of the Sufi path offered by the author in the quote with which the present commentary begins. More specifically, the author claims the Sufi path is “found in the heart of all Muslims who practice their religion for God’s sake alone”.

This raises a question. What is meant by the phrase: “for God’s sake alone”? Or, said in another way, what is the ‘sake’ of God -- that is, what is God’s purpose or interest in providing human beings with a Deen to practice?

Without doubt, as the Qur’an indicates, God does appreciate and honor those who show gratitude (14:7), and, as well, God loves those who love Him (5:54). However, do gratitude to, and love of, God, in and of themselves, serve the purpose, interest, or sake of God?

There are many things for which one might be thankful to God. There are many reasons why one might love God. Nevertheless, being thankful to God and loving God in conjunction with Divinity’s Purpose for Creation might involve a special kind of intention, understanding and commitment that might not be present in all expressions of gratitude and love.

Doing things without thought of reward is one thing. Doing things to serve the purpose of Creation might be quite another-- although there need not be any conflict between the two.

Indeed, conceivably, actions done without thought of reward might be a necessary prerequisite to the process of discovering what is entailed

by the 'sake' or Purpose of God. Undertaking activities without thought of reward (in the terminology of the Qur'an this is the "goodly loan" -- [57:11] ) is a sign of sincerity, and sincerity is a very important quality to have on the Sufi path even though sincerity might not be the ultimate spiritual Purpose that is being sought.

God's sake or purpose has something to do with the origins of Creation. As pointed out earlier, through a Hadith Qudsi, God said: "I was a 'Hidden Treasure' and desired (loved) to be known, so I brought forth Creation". To understand something of the Purpose underlying Creation, one needs to gain a certain degree of insight into what is entailed by Divinity's 'desire to be known', and one needs, as well, a certain degree of insight concerning the 'Hidden Treasure' that is to be known -- to whatever extent this Treasure can be known.

Just as the Shahadah consists of two parts, so too does the Purpose of Creation. The Divine Himma, Desire or Aspiration -- which is at the heart of Divinity's love for wishing the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known -- is an expression of the essence of the reality underlying the truth that there is one, and only one, God giving rise to this Divine Himma or Aspiration out of a pure, infinite generosity and love. At the same time, the recipient of this loving generosity is the 'fitra' or primordial, essential nature of the 'Reality of Muhammad' that is given expression through the ultimate reality and secret in which the truth that 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God' is rooted.

To have gratitude for God's sake, or to love for God's sake, is to have gratitude and love for God's Purpose concerning Creation, in general, and the individual, in particular. If, and when, an individual comes to understand the nature of the Purpose of Creation, then, the gratitude and love that forms part of this understanding might be of a very different order than a general sort of gratitude for this or that blessing, or a love of God for this or that reason -- as noble and praiseworthy as these latter qualities might be, in as much as they give expression to a doing of things without any thought of reward.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* also characterizes the Sufi path as 'an ideal'; and, 'achieving human perfection'. However, since God alone is perfect, "human perfection" might be something of a misnomer.

Consequently, rather than speaking in terms of "human perfection", the 'reality without a name' might be better served, at least at

this stage of the discussion, if one were to speak in terms of either fulfilling, or failing to fulfill, the purpose for which one has been created. Moreover, one only can fulfill such a purpose according to one's capacity to do so.

An individual might not have the spiritual capacity of a Prophet of God, or might not have the capacity of some of the great saints and friends of Divinity, but whatever capacity an individual does have, if the potential of that capacity is realized, then, the Divine Purpose is served. In other words, the goal is not necessarily perfection but, rather, the realization of potential in accordance with the capacity of one's 'fitra'.

Similarly, "an ideal" (which is one of the ways in which the author characterizes the Sufi path) is a 'standard of perfection' to be sought. Now, without wishing to suggest that fulfilling the purpose of life or realizing one's spiritual capacity is something that is easy to do, seeking to do this has a very different aura and ambience about it than does a search for perfection.

With God's help, seeking to struggle toward what one has the capacity to do would seem to be a plausible-- albeit, possibly, difficult-- journey to undertake. But, if God alone is perfect, then, perfection seems a rather quixotic quest.

The Qur'an gives expression to God's promises that no soul will be held accountable for what is beyond the capacity of that soul to bear (2:286). Human beings are being encouraged to do what is within their capacity to achieve and not what is beyond their means.

In addition, to speak in terms of "ideals" or 'standards of perfection to be sought' raises the question of what is to be the standard that is to be sought. Seemingly, the obvious answer for a Sufi, is Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Yet, if this is the standard, then, all spiritual quests are doomed to failure, for the spiritual station of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is beyond the grasp and capacity of anyone but Muhammad (peace be upon him). On the other hand, one can look to the life of the Prophet as a model that inspires, guides, and provides many examples of character and adab (spiritual etiquette) that might serve as seeds that one tries to grow, with God's help, as best one can, in the garden of one's own soul and heart according to one's circumstances and abilities.

Seeking to be equivalent to the Prophet, exhibits, among other things, a lack of humility, understanding and perspective. On the other hand, seeking to establish a certain similarity and resonance between one's activities and the Sunnah, or actions, of the Prophet is quite appropriate. This latter aspect seeks to adapt (in the sense of scaling) the teachings and example of the life of the Prophet to one's situation in order, with God's help, to realize one's spiritual potential --which is all one can do.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "the difficulty of achieving human perfection has meant that the individuals and institutions historically connected with the name cannot necessarily be held up as expressions of Sufism's true nature. The Sufi themselves have always been aware of the dangers of degeneration and corruption inherent in attempting to adapt social institutions to ideals that can only be fully actualized by rare individuals. When Bushanji said that Sufism is now a name without a reality, he was referring to these inadequate attempts to codify and institutionalize the heart of the tradition."

As indicated previously, the goal of the Sufi path is not necessarily a matter of achieving "human perfection". The reason why "the individuals and institutions historically connected with the name cannot necessarily be held up as expressions of Sufism's true nature" has nothing to do with "the difficulty of achieving human perfection" since, as indicated previously, the Sufi path is not an exercise in the seeking of perfection but is, instead, a quest for the realization of spiritual potential.

Furthermore, the dangers of which authentic Sufi shaykhs always have been aware is not a function of the "degeneration and corruption inherent in attempting to adapt social institutions to ideals that can only be fully actualized by rare individuals". The Sufi path is rooted in a process of spiritual chemistry involving 'teacher' and 'seeker' and does not involve "attempting to adapt social institutions to ideals".

The dangers of which genuine Sufi shaykhs always have been aware are the many forces -- both within human beings and outside of them -- that are actively trying to lead people away from, as well as undermine and misconstrue, the actual nature of the Sufi path. "Degeneration and corruption" seep in, when people, who are not authentic guides, and individuals, who are not sincere seekers, come to be perceived -- due to a variety of historical and social contingencies -- as being 'authentic' and 'sincere' respectively.

Consequently, when Bushanji maintained that Sufism was now ‘a name without a reality’, he was not “referring to ... inadequate attempts to codify and institutionalize the heart of the tradition” as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* suggests. Bushanji was talking, instead, about the spiritual darkness that had entered the awareness of the community and, as a result, there was an increasing number of people who did not understand that many of the individuals who were ascribing to themselves the descriptor “Sufi” were not entitled to do so because these ‘pretenders’ were not rooted in the ‘reality without a name’ that had been transmitted during, and through, the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as well as through the lives of those who were the authentic heirs of this mode of spiritual transmission.



### 19 - Unity and Multiplicity

Pages 9 and 10 - Chapter One: “Sufi teachers have frequently explained Sufism’s role in the context of *tawhid*, the assertion of God’s unity that is given its most succinct expression in the first Shahadah, *la ilaha illa Allah* ‘(There is) no god but God.’ By creating the universe, God causes multiplicity to appear from unity. He displays the potentialities of existence implied by His own ‘names and attributes’ (*asma’ wa sifat*) in an infinite universe. The creatures of this universe make manifest the nature of their Creator. The tremendous diversity of creation discloses the unlimitedness of God’s creative power. All opposition and strife express the boundless range of God’s perfections and the fact that the richness of the divine reality can only appear outside of itself in a domain of infinite differentiation and dispersion. The contrasting and conflicting things of the world can never achieve the peace and stillness of the divine, which alone is the coincidence of opposites.”

Commentary: Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, God does not cause “multiplicity to appear from unity”. A more correct way of stating the issue under consideration would be to say that ‘God gives expression to unity through the appearance of multiplicity’.

Unity and multiplicity are not different realities, and, therefore, multiplicity does not “appear from unity”. Whether one sees multiplicity, unity, or both simultaneously, is a matter of the ‘angle’ of spiritual engagement.

The generality of humanity sees only multiplicity. The spiritual elite see only unity. The elite of the elite see ‘multiplicity in unity’ and ‘unity in multiplicity’ simultaneously.

According to the author, God “displays the potentialities of existence implied by His own “names and attributes” (*asma’ wa sifat*) in an infinite universe.” To begin with, the “potentialities of existence” are not “implied by His own ‘names and attributes’” since there is no process or condition of ‘implication’ involved in this.

Inherent in the ‘Hidden Treasure’ are the potentials of the fixed form known as the ‘Reality of Muhammad’. Also inherent in the ‘Hidden Treasure’ are the ‘Names and Attributes’.

When the Divine Desire passes through -- by means of the command "Kun" (Be) -- the potentials of the fixed form inherent in the Creative Imagination of the 'Hidden Treasure', the potentials serve as something akin (i.e., the following is intended only as a heuristic device) to an 'object' in a Divine Holograph. In other words, the beam of 'tawhid' is refracted by the special mirror of Desire inherent in tawhid to generate two 'pathways' - both of which give expression to the same tawhid . One of these pathways of tawhid 'passes through' the potentials of the fixed form or the 'Reality of Muhammad' inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure', and the other pathway of tawhid constitutes the 'reference wave' of the Divine Names and Attributes that also are inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure'. Both of these pathways --the 'object wave' and the 'reference wave' -- are, then, joined together again (in accordance with the Original Desire of Divinity) to form the 'holographic image' of manifest existence that also is inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure'.

In truth, the Hidden Treasure, the Divine Desire, the fixed potentials of the 'Reality of Muhammad', the Names and Attributes, the Command of "Kun", and Manifest existence are all expressions of one, and the same, principle of tawhid. Multiplicity is merely the way in which Unity manifests Itself to Itself under conditions that Unity imposes on Itself -- conditions that are inherent in Unity.

What is infinite in all of this is not necessarily the universe, per se, (that is, the realm of manifested existence) but, rather, the nature of the tawhid or Unity that is rooted in the Divine Desire of a 'Hidden Treasure' that is inherent in the Essence or 'Dhat' of Divinity. Because this Essence can neither be exhausted nor circumscribed, the potential for disclosure of this or that jewel of the 'Hidden Treasure' by means of Divine Himma, Desire, or Aspiration is without any limits except those that Divinity imposes on Itself. Therefore, the number of universes that are possible, as well as the extent of such universes (e.g., finite, infinite, or both, or neither) that might be given expression through this Divine Plenitude, are known only to Divinity.

We can know of the 'Hidden Treasure' only what is disclosed to us through the way in which tawhid permits us to participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in the 'Hidden Treasure'. Beyond this, Divinity is unknowable except to Divinity.

In the light of the foregoing outline, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is not quite correct when he says that: "The creatures of this

universe make manifest the nature of their Creator”, as well as when he states: “The tremendous diversity of creation discloses the unlimitedness of God’s creative power”. This is so for a variety of reasons.

What is made manifest in the “creatures of this universe” are some of the “Names and Attributes” inherent in the ‘Hidden Treasure’. The Names and Attributes of this realm of manifest existence are but a small subset of the Names and Attributes inherent in the ‘Hidden Treasure’.

In any event, the Sufi masters are agreed that the potentials of the fixed forms never come into existence per se. Instead, manifest existence is the image generated through the appearances of the interaction of the Divine Names and Attributes, as the principle of tawhid incorporating those Names and Attributes (and which is inherent in the original Divine Himma or Aspiration to be known) engages the aspect of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ known as the ‘fixed form’ of the ‘Reality of Muhammad’ that arises through the Divine capacity for Creative Imagination.

Created existence is projected upon a Divine screen whose ‘fabric’ is woven from those Names and Attributes of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ to which Divinity chooses to give expression through the realm of the Manifest. The ‘images’ of created existence appearing on that Divine Screen consist of various combinations of the Names and Attributes whose forms (that is, the combinations of Names and Attributes which underwrite ‘created images’) are a function of the nature of the Original Divine Himma and how this Himma or Aspiration wishes different dimensions of the potential of the fixed form of the ‘Reality of Muhammad’ to appear in Manifest Reality.

Creatures of the universe do not so much “make manifest the nature of their Creator”, as much as they make manifest the intent of the Divine Himma of the ‘Hidden Treasure’. In fact, the ‘Creator’ is one of the Names inherent in the ‘Hidden Treasure’ that is reflected in the nature of the Divine Himma concerning the ‘Hidden Treasure’.

The ‘nature’ or Dhat of Divinity is not made manifest through the ‘creatures’, but, rather, only the nature of the Divine Himma is made manifest through the creatures. What lies beyond the horizons of this Divine Himma or Aspiration is unknown and unknowable, except to Divinity.

Similarly, the author is not quite accurate when he says that: “The tremendous diversity of creation discloses the unlimitedness of God’s creative power.” More specifically, no matter how diverse creation might be, it can

never 'disclose' the "unlimitedness of God's creative power", although such diversity might suggest such unlimitedness.

What is unlimited, or infinite, can never be disclosed, for to do so would be to render that which is unlimited, limited, in the form of a disclosure that circumscribes the unlimited -- therefore, becoming a contradiction in terms. The diversity of creation is what it is, but we do not know what lies beyond this diversity within the possibilities of the 'Hidden Treasure'.

The Qur'an indicates that even if one were to use all the trees of the earth as pens, and one were to use all the seas as ink, the resulting description would not be able to exhaust (31:27) the possibilities inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure'. This Quranic boundary marker alludes to the upper limit of the capacity of manifestation to disclose the Divine Bounty, as well as constitutes the horizons of the Divine Himma with respect to what is selected for disclosure.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*,: "All opposition and strife express the boundless range of God's perfections and the fact that the richness of the divine reality can only appear outside of itself in a domain of infinite differentiation and dispersion. The contrasting and conflicting things of the world can never achieve the peace and stillness of the divine, which alone is the coincidence of opposites."

The author's way of stating things at this juncture is somewhat oblique. For example, one has difficulty understanding how "opposition and strife express the boundless range of God's perfections". Chittick's statement stands in need of some elaboration. All manifestation gives perfect expression to the principle of tawhid that is at the heart of the Divine Himma that loved for the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known through Creation. Consequently, both the 'dynamic of opposites', as well as the strife and conflict that are manifested in 'appearances, also give perfect expression to the principle of tawhid.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that "striving is the ordinance of God and whatever God hath ordained can only be ordained through striving". Striving in the midst of opposites, conflict and strife has been ordained by God.

Every opposite, every instance of strife, or of conflict, has a role to play at the behest of the Original Divine Himma. For through the presence of opposites, strife and conflict, one engages the Divine Purpose.

The field of life containing the seed of 'fitra' must be tilled and worked. The forces threatening the growth and development of 'fitra' must be resisted and countered.

One must learn how to work with the elements of nature in order to protect and nurture the seed that has been planted by the Divine Himma or Aspiration. One must learn the art and science of balancing all factors or forces so that they might be brought together in the kind of harmonious arrangement that is necessary, God willing, for the potential of the seed of 'fitra' to be brought forth.

The lower soul, or 'nafsi amaara', which, in its unredeemed form, is the seat of rebellion against the realization of 'fitra', serves the Divine Purpose perfectly through its very 'imperfections'. For, these rebellious features constitute a primary source of the forces against which one must strive in order to unlock the secrets of one's primordial, original nature (i.e., fitra) -- through striving and by the Grace of Allah: dispersion is replaced by gathering; separation gives way to union; subtlety is manifested rather than density; contraction leads to expansion; darkness is removed by light; ignorance gives way to knowledge; doubt prostrates before belief; and falsehood perishes in the face of Truth.

The nafs has been perfectly designed to fulfill a particular purpose. Indeed, 'nafsi amaara', is the prototype for how, eventually -- given sufficient striving through the Grace of God -- harmony arises out of opposites and conflict. More specifically, when 'nafsi amaara' becomes redeemed through a striving that is properly guided, then, the qualities of nafs are redirected and re-dedicated, becoming in the process, allies in the quest for spiritual realization.

Similarly, all opposites have been designed to induce human beings -- at least those individuals who are receptive to this process, to work toward coming to understand the Purpose underlying, and manifested through, Creation. For instance, one cannot begin to appreciate the nature of 'light' and, thereby, have a reason to search for it, without knowing something of 'darkness'; or, one cannot really appreciate the nature of peace, and, thereby, have a motive for seeking it, without knowing something of discord and conflict; or, one cannot appreciate the nature of knowledge, and, therefore, have occasion to strive for it, without having experienced something of ignorance, and so on.

Whatever the qualities of something might be, those qualities -- however imperfect and problematic they maybe, in and of themselves -- give perfect expression to the principle of tawhid that is at the heart of the Divine Himma which loves for the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known in accordance with the nature of that Divine Himma or Aspiration. The appearance of opposition and conflict within the realm of the manifest are just that -- 'appearances' ... appearances that are rooted in, and give expression, to the Divine Himma that sets Its Purpose in 'motion' in a way that perfectly manifests the Niyat or Intention of that Aspiration.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* states that "the contrasting and conflicting things of the world can never achieve the peace and stillness of the divine, which alone is the coincidence of opposites". In truth, the 'conflicting things of the world' are at peace with their Divinely-given role as conflicting things. There is a 'stillness' in the 'Eye of the Hurricane' of conflicting forces.

The Qur'an informs us: "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise God and there is nothing that does not glorify God in praise, but ye understand not their manner of praise." (17:44) On the basis of the foregoing, one might conclude that conflict and strife also are preoccupied with praising God, but in our veiled condition, we do not see the manner of praise that is present there or how such conflict and strife are expressions of the principle of tawhid.

The author is also incorrect when he maintains that: "the richness of the divine reality can only appear outside (my emphasis) of itself in a domain of infinite differentiation and dispersion." There can be no "outside", and this is made quite evident in the Qur'an when, for example, we are told that "God is the First and the Last, the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden." (57:3)

20 - Jamal/Jalal

Pages 10 and 11 - Chapter One: “Many Sufis reduce the basic archetypes for all plurality and multiplicity to two divine attributes - beauty and majesty, or mercy and wrath, or gentleness and severity. The created traces of mercy and wrath can be pictured in terms of the yin-yang symbol. Just as there is no pure yin or yang (as represented by the black dot in the white half and the white dot in the black half), so also there is no pure mercy or pure wrath in the created domain. Wherever mercy displays its signs and traces within creation, there will also be manifestations of wrath and vice versa. In the world as we experience it, certain things display the attribute of wrath more directly, and others are dominated by mercy. In general, things pertaining to the external and material realms tend to manifest wrath, whereas the closer we move to the spiritual world, the closer we approach pure mercy. As Rumi puts it: “This world is the house of God’s severity.” -- which is to say that the other world is the house of God’s gentleness and mercy.

“Given that God’s wrath is associated with the world’s distance from God, it is also closely associated with the Sharia - which concerns itself with the outermost human domain, that of bodily activity. However, the wrath that shows its face in the Sharia derives from God’s mercy and leads back to it. Although mercy and wrath have a yin-yang sort of relationship in this world, the two do not have equal weight with God. A famous prophetic saying tells us that God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath, which is to say that God’s essential nature is mercy and gentleness, and that wrath and severity pertain to the domain of created things. The rather stern and forbidding face of the Sharia, which demands that people follow its commandments or taste the chastisement of hell, displays God’s majesty and severity, but lurking beneath its surface is the promise of the precedent mercy. All things come forth from mercy, and all will return to mercy in the end.”

Commentary: The author starts out on the wrong foot when he says: “Many Sufi reduce the basic archetypes for all plurality and multiplicity to two divine attributes -- beauty and majesty, or mercy and wrath, or gentleness and severity.” The terms that he is construing in terms of: ‘beauty and majesty, or mercy and wrath, or gentleness and severity’ are ‘jamal’ and ‘jalal’, and neither of these terms can be reduced down in the way the author is suggesting.

'Jamal' and 'jalal' refer not to specific attributes, but, rather, to several classes of attributes. Qualities of harmony, love, compassion, beauty, mercy, ease, friendship, gentleness, beneficence, forgiveness, expansion, and so on, tend to be subsumed under the category of 'jamali' attributes, whereas qualities of rigor, constraint, difficulty, majesty, transcendence, severity, justice, accountability, wrath, incomparability, and so on, tend to be subsumed under the category of 'jalali' attributes.

The principle of tawhid or unity encompasses both categories of attributes. Moreover, there is no facet of 'plurality and multiplicity' that does not give expression to this principle that weaves the Divine Names and Attributes together to give expression, at every 'point' of the manifest realm, to the Purpose inherent in the Divine Himma that loved for the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known through Creation.

At any given 'point' of manifestation, many qualities of 'Jamal' and many qualities of 'jalap' come together to give expression to the form, properties, nature and potential of the projected image of a given aspect of the fixed form within the 'Reality of Muhammad'. At every 'point' of manifestation the whole, original Divine Desire is present and focused on bringing forth Its own purpose. This is the Will of God.

Not only does the author confuse specific attributes with categories of attributes, but he compounds this problem by settling on two specific attributes - - namely, mercy and wrath -- as his way of summarizing the whole issue. In the process, this manner of approaching various issues of importance to Islam, in general, and the Sufi path, in particular, introduces a considerable amount of misinformation and misdirection into the ensuing discussion.

The author begins his outline of "mercy" and "wrath" by referring to a symbol from Chinese philosophy -- the yin-yang relationship. This symbol consists of a circle divided into two, non-linear, curved teardrop-like figures that have several dimensions of shared symmetry but are complementary to one another and also express an inverted, yet spatially contiguous, dynamic with respect to each other.

Although the author describes one of these teardrop-like figures as being white, while the other is black, the color scheme of the original symbol is red and black, not white and black. The red teardrop-like figure represents the realm of 'yang' encompassing the male element, along with heat, light, and life. The black teardrop-like figure gives expression to the realm of 'yin' that

includes the female element, as well as attributes of cold, darkness, and death.

Within the heart of the red teardrop-like figure is a black dot, and there is a similar, but red, dot within the black teardrop-like figure. These dots are intended to convey the idea that there is a subtle and deeper level of dynamic confluence in which a trace of opposite, but complementary, elements and forces operates within each set of attributes.

The author mentions the yin-yang symbol because he believes the relationship between the attributes of 'mercy' and 'wrath' bear certain similarities to that symbol. More particularly, he seems to feel that, like the yin-yang dynamic, the relationship between 'mercy' and 'wrath' is one in which there is an element of mercy within wrath, as well as an element of wrath within mercy, so that neither of these attributes comes in a 'pure' form.

Citing the yin-yang symbol as, in part, bearing some sort of analogical resemblance to the Islamic context being considered is problematic in a number of respects. First of all, the set of attributes that are encompassed, respectively, by 'jamal' and 'jalal', are not at all comparable to the set of qualities to which 'yin' and 'yang' give expression.

In fairness, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is not necessarily stating, or implying, that such a parallel exists. However, this difference needs to be noted because it carries over into the features that the author does wish to suggest as being somewhat parallel between the yin-yang symbol and his discussion of the attributes of Divinity.

As indicated previously, jamali and jalali attributes are both differentiated expressions of tawhid in action, and notwithstanding whatever differences there might be between these sets of attributes, the attributes within these categories are acting in concert with one another to produce a coherent, unified, harmonious whole. As such, the attributes of jamal and jalal are woven together in order to modulate the realm of manifestation in accordance with the niyat or intention at the heart of the Divine Himma concerning the 'Hidden Treasure'.

All of the attributes are added together to give expression to the Divine recipe for producing the 'stew of manifestation'. This 'stew' will have appropriate proportions of each 'ingredient' or attribute introduced at

just the right instant to generate the flavor, consistency, dynamic, and so on, that is called for by the Original Purpose.

In contrast to the author's contention that: "there is no pure mercy or pure wrath in the created domain", each of the Divine attributes or 'ingredients' is pure and unadulterated, with an array of infinite nuances and possibilities on which to draw from within the nature of that attribute or ingredient in order to lend just the precise modulating effect for which the recipe calls at any given point of manifestation.

There could be situations in which attributes of, say, severity and compassion, are brought together so there is either severe-compassion or compassionate-severity in evidence within manifestation. Yet, this involves a dynamic confluence of differentiated attributes modulating the character of that which is manifested, rather than a situation in which each attribute carries within it a trace of some opposite attribute as the author's use of the yin-yang symbol suggests.

To follow up on the above example, severe-compassion and compassionate-severity are not necessarily the same -- although in some instances they could be just different ways of saying the same thing. In the first instance, severity is modulating compassion, whereas in the second instance, compassion is modulating severity.

There are an infinite array of combinations in which the attributes of severity and compassion could come together in some form of modulated dynamic. Moreover, one must keep in mind that not only are there many, many Divine attributes other than severity and compassion, but any, or all, of these attributes might be present, from 'point' to 'point' of the manifested universe, modulating that universe in precise and exacting ways to give expression to the Divine Himma concerning the 'Hidden Treasure' that is to be known, in various ways, through Creation.

Notwithstanding the foregoing considerations, the author is incorrect when he maintains that: "wherever mercy displays its signs and traces within creation, there will also be manifestations of wrath and vice versa". While it is true that various attributes from within both general categories of attributes -- that is, 'jamal' and 'jalal' -- will be present at any given locus of manifestation, it is not necessarily true that the jalali side of things, so to speak, will always be in terms of 'wrath'. In fact, depending on circumstances, the attribute of 'wrath' might be entirely absent from a

given locus of manifestation, although some other expression of the jalali category --such as constraint, rigor, justice, and so on -- might be present

In addition to the foregoing considerations, there is, as well, an element of arbitrariness in how the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* conceptualizes the relationship between, for example, 'mercy' and 'wrath'. He is assuming human beings can readily identify what constitutes an instance of 'mercy' or 'wrath'.

Is the granting of someone's desire for money, prestige, ease, fame, material goods, and so on, an expression of 'mercy' or 'wrath'? After all, if the granting of these desires leads away from fulfilling the purpose of life, then, irrespective of how pleasant the things and conditions being received might be, they could all be merely variations on a theme of being given enough rope with which to hang oneself.

On the other hand, can one necessarily say that the imposition of poverty, difficulty, hardship, constraint, and so on, is a matter of 'wrath'? If the experience of these conditions leads to spiritual purification, development, and realization, or if they deny one 'opportunities' that could be the means of one's spiritual ruin, then, in reality, the presence of such jalali attributes in one's life is a blessing in disguise.

Is a slow, painful death necessarily an expression of God's displeasure? Is a quick death necessarily merciful?

Seeking forgiveness for one's transgressions against God, others and oneself is an important process on any spiritual path. A lingering illness, despite all its attendant difficulties, could afford the opportunity of time through which to try to make some form of restitution -- even if only in words -- for the ways in which one might have wronged others or oneself.

If one takes advantage of this opportunity, then, the illness might be an expression of severe-compassion. If one fails to take advantage of such an opportunity, then, conceivably, such an illness is -- above and beyond the illness itself-- just another face of severity for one has met the opportunity with denial and rejection.

On the other hand, if one dies quickly, although one has avoided the pain and difficulty of a long illness, one also has missed out on having the time to mend fences, or bring past hurts to an amenable form of resolution, before passing on. Is the glass half full, or half empty, or

neither? Is a quick death a matter of mercy in action or wrath in action or something else?

Going through difficulty, as well as going through ease, can have a variety of meanings on a variety of levels. Everything depends on why Divinity has wished for a given set of modulating attributes to come together to create a context of manifestation that has, among other features, properties of difficulty and/or ease.

Consequently, everything must be referred back to the Divine *niyat* at the heart of the Original *Himma* or Aspiration that underlies and underwrites all of manifested existence. One also would do well to remember that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Hell is veiled in delights, and Heaven is veiled in hardships and miseries" -- although, certainly, not everything that is delightful is necessarily a sign of Hell, and not everything that is a hardship or misery is a veiled form of Paradise.

Furthermore, maybe, we, ourselves, have a hand in determining whether a given context turns out to be an expression of 'mercy' or 'wrath'. More specifically, Divinity might bring together a confluence of attributes to create a context of challenge or opportunity, and the manner in which we respond will be the determining factor as to how the situation, ultimately, will be characterized.

If opportunity is given and we take advantage of the situation to our own spiritual benefit, then, the opportunity could be considered a mercy. However, if an opportunity is given and we fail to take advantage of the chance for spiritual improvement, or if we misuse the opportunity, then, although the opportunity originally might have been offered as a mercy, we have transgressed against our own souls, and, in the process, we might have imposed severity on ourselves through our rejection or wasting of the opportunity

I say "might have imposed severity on ourselves", for, conceivably, the initial opportunity might have been given by God with the foreknowledge that we would not be equal to the opportunity, but, nonetheless, God also intended that the 'failure' be an occasion for a subsequent seeking of forgiveness that would be granted. So, in this case, the severity that we impose on ourselves through our failure might become an avenue to mercy at some later juncture in our lives.

To label situations as exhibiting ‘mercy’ or ‘wrath’ is both simplistic and presumptuous. The realm of manifestation is complex, layered, subtle, textured, nuanced, deep, non-linear, rich, and mysterious.

There is a Sufi story apropos to the present discussion. According to this story, an insincere, hypocritical, spiritually rebellious individual is praying and asking for something to be given to the individual by Divinity. God calls upon an angel to satisfy the individual’s request so that the person will be of the opinion that God is happy with him or her.

The story goes on to describe another individual who is praying for some need to be met. This person, unlike the first one, is a sincere, committed, servant of Divinity. Upon listening to this individual’s prayer, God summons an angel to see to the fulfillment of the prayer so that this person will know that God is happy with her or him.

Two people ... two prayers ... two wishes granted ... but two, totally different relationships between the respective individuals and Divinity. The Qur’an states: “And when My servants question thee concerning Me, then, surely I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant who cries unto Me. So, let them hear My call and let them trust Me in order that they may be led aright.” (2:186)

If we ask of Divinity and we are given what we ask for, we do not necessarily know what the significance of this ‘gift’ is. God answers the prayer of the supplicant, but if the supplicant is someone who is heedless of God’s Call and does not, in essence, trust God with his or her life (but only with what the individual desires), and, ultimately, really does not wish to be led aright, then, the granting of such a person’s prayer might not mean what that supplicant supposes is the case -- that is, there could be an expression of Divine displeasure hidden beneath the exterior of the Divine ‘favor’ -- but Allah knows best.

What we do know is the following: on the one hand, all of life is an opportunity and a challenge; on the other hand, all accounts will be settled on the Last Day. God alone knows how this all will come together in resolution with respect to the original Divine intent -- for “the Command belongs to God entirely” (3:182), and “He shall not be questioned as to what He does.” (21:23)

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: “In general, things pertaining to the external and material realms tend to manifest wrath,

whereas the closer we move to the spiritual world, the closer we approach pure mercy.” The foregoing perspective is completely arbitrary, speculative, and without spiritual authority.

There is absolutely no warrant in either the Qur’an or the Hadith for maintaining that “the external and material realms tend to manifest wrath”. The external and material realms are the doorways of spiritual opportunity. The external and material realms are the points of entry through which we approach spiritual development and maturity.

To be sure, the Prophet is reported to have said things like: “this world is accursed and everything in this world is accursed, except the remembrance of God”, or, “this world is maintained in existence by illusion”, or, “the root of all prayers is the renunciation of the world, and the love of the world is the root of all mischief”. Similarly, the Qur’an expresses considerations for reflection such as “the commerce of this world does not profit them” (2:16), or, “the life of this world is but a pastime and a game” (29:64), or, “what is there after the Real, save error?” (10:32).

Nonetheless, these kinds of statements do not serve to confirm the author’s previous contention that “the external and material realms tend to manifest wrath”. Instead, in each instance (whether from the Prophet or the Qur’an), the nature of ‘the external and material realms’ are being put into proper perspective.

For example, in order to understand what the Prophet means by “this world is accursed”, one must first understand how our being in the world affords us the opportunity to remember God. Moreover, in order to come to understand how the ‘world is maintained in existence by illusion’, one needs to experience the world, and it is this experience which, with spiritual guidance, can lead to the insights concerning the illusory nature of that world. Or, if, as the Prophet says, ‘the root of all prayers is the renunciation of the world’, then, one must have exposure to that which is to be renounced (i.e., the world) in order to find one’s way to the root of such prayers.

Alternatively, when the Qur’an warns us about how the commerce of this world does not profit us, the implication on the horizons of this warning is that there is something of the world, beside commerce, which can be of benefit. Furthermore, when we are told that the life of this world is a pastime and a game, then, we need to find out, to some degree, about ‘the life of this world’ in order to see how, and in what way, it is a ‘pastime and a game’, as well as how one might spend one’s time in the world so that

one's life will not succumb to a fate of being merely a pastime and a game. Finally, if, as the Qur'an informs us rhetorically, there is nothing after the Real, save error, then, surely we must try to learn the secrets that permit us to differentiate between the Real and error, and the only opportunity we have to do this is in this world in which we currently find ourselves.

If it were not for the problems, difficulties, frustrations, challenges, constraints, questions, and opportunities generated through our engagement of the external and material realms, there would be nothing to push against to bring forth the potential of 'fitra' ... our primordial, spiritual nature. The external and material realms are so many catalytic agents for engendering alchemical transformations of the soul.

To reduce, 'in general', as the author does, the external and material realms to being expressions of 'wrath' does a terrible disservice to the beauty, majesty, generosity, love, subtlety, and compassion of the Divine Himma that sought for the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known through Creation. To reduce, for the most part, everything in the external and material realms to being a function of wrath totally distorts the true nature of tawhid or Divine Unity.

To support his claim that "things pertaining to the external and material realms tend to manifest wrath, whereas the closer we move to the spiritual world, the closer we approach pure mercy", the author quotes a line from Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) -- namely, "this world is the house of God's severity," -- and, then, proceeds to maintain that the implication here is "the other world is the house of God's gentleness and mercy".

While the excerpt from Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) might be correct as far as it goes, it also takes Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) out of context. On occasion, this world might be "the house of God's severity", but on other occasions, this world is 'the house of God's mercy, blessings, beauty, guidance, support, love, as well as spiritual realization', and Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) would not have disagreed with any of these characterizations.

If not for this world, Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) might never have benefited from what Shams had to teach him. If not for this world, Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) might never have fallen madly in love with that which was being transmitted, by God, through Shams (may Allah be pleased with him), and, therefore, might never have abandoned the cul-de-sac of his books on theology. If not for this world, Rumi (may Allah be pleased

with him) might never have been transported to states of mystical ecstasy out of which the *Mathnawi* and sacred turning arose.

For Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him), the world can be “the house of God’s severity”. However, if one looks at all of the writings of Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him), one also will find considerable evidence to indicate the many ways -- through both poetry and prose -- in which Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) acknowledged that the world is also the locus of manifestation for many of God’s other attributes -- both ‘jamali’, as well as ‘jalali’.

Moreover, and in concert with something pointed out earlier in this current commentary, even if one were to grant that the world is “the house of God’s severity”, severity is not necessarily an expression of Divine Wrath. The attributes of ‘jalali’ might be difficult to bear, and in this respect might appear to be the opposite of the ease associated with many ‘jamali’ attributes (more on this in a moment), nevertheless, the attributes of ‘jalali’ are not in opposition to the purpose of Creation, nor are they obstacles to the goal of individual spiritual realization.

To be spiritually balanced, an individual must have elements of both ‘jamali’ and ‘jalali’ attributes in one’s life. In other words, there must be expansion as well as contraction. There must be compassion as well as justice. There must be ease as well as rigor. There must be peace as well as struggle. There must be forgiveness as well as accountability. There must be love as well as logic. There must be ecstasy as well as sobriety.

The Qur’an states: “God contracts and expands.” (2:245) To live in balance with both jamali and jalali qualities requires one to come to an intimate realization concerning the Truth being given expression through this Quranic ayat.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “O Allah! I seek refuge from your punishment, by your mercy. I seek refuge from your wrath by your contentment, and I seek refuge from You by You.” This is a prayer of recognition that “God contracts and expands”.

The same Truth is being addressed -- albeit in slightly different ways --when Bayazid al-Bistami (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “The contraction of the heart lies in the expansion of the ego (nafsi amaara), while the expansion of the heart lies in the ego’s contraction”, as well as when al-Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him) stated that: “Contraction is the

contraction of the heart in the state of being veiled, while expansion is the expansion of the heart in the state of unveiling.” Contraction and expansion -- whether of the ego or the heart -- are both expressions of God’s Purpose in action within Creation.

We learn through the influence of ‘jamali’ experiences. We learn through the impact of ‘jalali’ influences.

Each set of attributes has the capacity to leave its indelible mark upon us. Therefore, each set has the potential to help induce spiritual transformation and, God willing, thereby, lead to a deep, abiding realization concerning the truth of the ways in which Divinity, or the ‘Real’, is present in our lives.

Just as ‘jalali’ attributes give expression to dimensions of spiritual assistance, despite their quality of rigor, severity, majesty, and so on, so too, ‘jamali’ attributes can have an intensity about them that is overwhelming, and, under certain circumstances, the spiritual development of an individual might be stalled if the individual gets ‘hung up’, so to speak, in one, or another, state of ecstasy. For example, some people on the Sufi path have entered into states of ecstasy and, then, passed away from this world permanently -- either physically or psychologically.

The latter individuals (i.e., those who have passed away from the ‘normal’ world in a psychological/spiritual way) are known as ‘majthub’, or the spiritually intoxicated. In certain cases involving someone who is majthub, if spiritual development is to continue, such an individual might need to be brought out of his or her condition of intoxication, and, yet, because the condition is mesmerizing and expansive in character, the individual might resist or resent attempts to remove them from such a state. Therefore, although states of ecstasy tend to be expressive of ‘jamali’ attributes -- which often are associated, in the minds of many people, with qualities of ease -- nonetheless, such states can have an intensity that is reminiscent, in some ways, of jalali attributes, and, as well, they can have a negative impact on spiritual development, despite the fact many people associate ‘jamali’ attributes with mercy, compassion, beneficence, and so on.

Within the extended quote at the beginning of this chapter, which the current commentary is exploring, the author states: “Given that God’s wrath is associated with the world’s distance from God, it is also closely associated with the Sharia -- which concerns itself with the outermost human domain, that of bodily activity. However, the wrath that shows its face in the Sharia

derives from God's mercy and leads back to it." This quote is problematic in so many ways.

To begin with, the author contradicts himself. Even if one were to assume that God's wrath is present, vis-à-vis the world, nonetheless, in point of fact, the very presence of the attribute of wrath proves that the world is not distant from God. Rather, the world is close to Divinity manifested in the form of wrath.

The nature of Creation -- both in terms of how it came into being, as well as in terms of the manner in which Creation is sustained and passes away -- is rooted in the Presence of Divinity. The former (i.e. Creation) depends totally on the latter (i.e., Divinity) and cannot, even for a picosecond, exist independently of, or distant from, Divinity.

Even the inhabitants of one, or another, of the levels of Hell are not distant from God. God is very close to them, but this closeness is in the form of manifestations that are very difficult to bear.

On the other hand, the Qur'an clearly indicates that the quality of mercy is near at hand for some of the inhabitants of Hell. More specifically, the Qur'an describes how there will be some individuals who will, as a result of their own misdeeds, fall into Hell. Yet, at some point, these individuals will be forgiven by Divinity and raised up to a heavenly condition.

At the same time, after being removed from Hell and given a place in Paradise, the aforementioned individuals will bear a sign upon them indicating how they have been removed from Hell through the mercy of God. So, God is not distant from the inhabitants of Hell but, rather, chooses to interact with them through attributes that are appropriate to the situation.

In the previous quotation, the author also maintains that the wrath of God is "closely associated with the Sharia -- which concerns itself with the outermost human domain, that of bodily activity. However, the wrath that shows its face in the Sharia derives from God's mercy and leads back to it."

Wrath does not show its face in the Shari'ah. Wrath, however, might, or might not, be manifested in response to how individuals respond to Shari'ah.

The Shari'ah does reflect, among other things, qualities of order, discipline, rigor, privation, constraints, striving, struggle, and challenge. But, these qualities are not the face of wrath. They are

windows onto the face of being, life, opportunity, possibility, development, growth, and purpose.

Although Shari'ah does not exhaust the relationships that are possible between Divinity and humanity, Shari'ah does constitute a very fundamental dimension of spiritual guidance. As spiritual guidance, Shari'ah is an expression, or reflection, of the Divine Himma or Aspiration out of which Creation arose.

Mercy might be one of the attributes operating through Shari'ah, but the mandate underlying Shari'ah is much broader than mercy. The mandate underlying Shari'ah is a function of the original desire of Divinity to be known through Creation, and, therefore, as the Qur'an indicates "God embraces all things in Mercy and Knowledge" (40:7).

The author is also incorrect when he claims that Shari'ah "concerns itself with the outermost human domain, that of bodily activity." In truth, God looks to the intention from that acts emerge, and not just the bodily activity, per se.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has described how some people will fast, yet all they will derive from their fasting is hunger. Similarly, some people will spend their nights in prayer, but all they will derive from their efforts is sleeplessness.

Bodily actions are not enough. There must be an inner sincerity as well.

The medium of exchange through which the requirements of Shari'ah are observed might be bodily actions. Nevertheless, the standard on which this medium of exchange is based is the gold of intention.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* states that: "Although mercy and wrath have a yin-yang sort of relationship in this world, the two do not have equal weight with God. A famous prophetic saying tells us that God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath, which is to say that God's essential nature is mercy and gentleness, and that wrath and severity pertain to the domain of created things."

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) issued a warning which indicated that while people were free to reflect on all facets of existence, they should not reflect upon God's Essence or Dhat. To posit "that God's essential nature is mercy and gentleness" tends to transgress the boundaries that the Prophet was cautioning people not to cross.

The Essence of God is unknown and unknowable. One cannot perform a sort of reverse spiritual engineering with respect to the Created realm and use the signs of this latter realm to draw inferences about the nature of the Essence that made these signs possible.

Naturally, whatever is manifested on whatever level, or in whatever dimension, of the Created universe, is made possible by the Divine Essence that underwrites all that is possible, potential, or realized. But, ultimately, no one knows the Divine Essence but Divinity.

Does this mean the Created universe is cut off from the Divine Essence? In terms of knowledge and understanding concerning that Essence, the answer is 'yes', but in terms of Creation's having been 'brought forth', the answer is 'no'.

More specifically, the original desire or aspiration or himma for the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known through Creation was made possible by the Divine Essence. However, we do not know to what Divinity was referring when It declared that "I was a Hidden Treasure and desired (or loved) to be known".

We cannot assume that Divinity was referring to all of Essence when mention is made of the 'Hidden Treasure'. Alternatively, if Divinity was, in fact, equating the 'Hidden Treasure' with Essence, we cannot assume that Divinity's desire to be known encompassed all of Essence or all of the 'Hidden Treasure, rather than some facet or aspect, thereof. Finally, whatever Divinity was making reference to when indicating that 'I was a 'Hidden Treasure' and desired to be known', in truth, the Creation that was brought forth to know Divinity, in some fashion (and which also constitutes a set of created 'spectacles' through which Divinity views or experiences the Hidden Treasure), this Creation only could know Divinity in accordance with the 'capacity to know' that had been placed into Creation as a potential for realizing the purpose of the Original Desire or Aspiration of Divinity.

In effect, all that can be known, to whatever extent Creation has been given the capacity to do so, is what is contained in the Desire or Aspiration or Himmah of Divinity concerning the relationship between the Hidden Treasure and Creation. We can know nothing outside of, or beyond, the horizons of this Divine Aspiration.

Tawhid, the Divine Attributes, the Divine Names, Creation, the 'Reality of Muhammad', Purpose, Capacity, Possibility, Shari'ah, Realization, and

Knowledge are all rooted in, and expressed through, the nature of the original Divine Aspiration or Desire. The nature of this original Himma defines the boundaries, properties and potential of the only universe (physical and spiritual) we can ever know.

We have as many degrees of freedom as are permitted by that original Divine Wish. Our limits are fixed by that Divine Desire.

Beyond these degrees of freedom and limitations, we cannot travel. Analogically, the Original Desire or Aspiration is to Creation what the Lote Tree was for Archangel Gabriel (may Allah's peace be upon him) during the ascension of Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- namely, that beyond which we cannot go.

Existentially, we are linked to the Divine Essence by virtue of the original Aspiration or Himma that arose out of that Essence. If not for the former, the latter could not be, but the Divine Aspiration reveals nothing about the Divine Essence except that this Essence has the capacity to generate such Desires and that the Essence has underwritten all that is contained in that Desire and, as such, forms the Divine Ground out of which the 'magic beanstalk' of Divine Aspiration has arisen.

Existentially, the 'beanstalk' (i.e., Devine Desire) roots us to that Ground, for the existence of the Divine Wish, as well as our existence that issues forth from the depths of the Divine Aspiration, both depend on that Ground for sustenance. Furthermore, although we can know something of the 'magic beanstalk' (whatever is permitted in this regard), we cannot know the Ground out of which this 'beanstalk arises'.

The beanstalk knows the Ground and is on intimate terms with the Ground. The knowledge of Creation, however, is limited to the 'life of the beanstalk' -- that is, the nature of the Divine Aspiration as manifested in this realm of Being.

As indicated in an earlier quote, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* refers to a Hadith Qudsi (God is speaking through the Prophet but what is said is distinct from Revelation) in which Divinity asserts that 'My mercy has precedence over my wrath'. On the basis of this Hadith, the author goes on to conclude that the Hadith is just another way of saying that "God's essential nature is mercy and gentleness, and that wrath and severity pertain to the domain of created things."

'Mercy' and 'wrath' are attributes that are manifested through the Divine Aspiration concerning the 'Hidden Treasure' and Creation. According to the Hadith Qudsi in question, implicit in the purpose or intention at the heart of this Aspiration is a principle which holds that either after all is said and done, and/or under appropriate circumstances, the attribute of 'mercy' will be given precedence over the attribute of 'wrath'.

'Mercy' and 'wrath' are Divine attributes in as much as they give expression to certain dimensions of the principle of tawhid that is operative within the nature of the Divine Aspiration. However, one cannot ascribe the attribute of 'mercy' to Essence any more than one can ascribe the attributes of "wrath and severity to the domain of created things".

'Mercy' and 'wrath' are differentiated Divine attributes that belong to Essence in the sense that Essence has brought these attributes into Manifest Being, with the properties that they have, and with the roles which they play in the purpose of the original Divine Aspiration or Desire. However, non-differentiated 'Reality' lies beneath that which is differentiated, and the very meaning of being 'non-differentiated' is to be without attributes of any kind.

'Mercy' and 'wrath' are 'role-players', so to speak, just as are all the other Attributes and Names of Divinity. They all are joined together into a principle of tawhid that serves, and gives expression to, the original Divine Aspiration concerning the linking of the 'Hidden Treasure' and Creation through knowing.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that: "The rather stern and forbidding face of the Sharia, which demands that people follow its commandments or taste the chastisement of hell, displays God's majesty and severity, but lurking beneath its surface is the promise of the precedent mercy." The "stern and forbidding face' to which the author refers, does not belong to the Shari'ah, but, rather to nafsi amaara, the seat of spiritual rebellion within human beings.

In effect, nafsi amaara casts its own fears, dislikes, and disinclinations onto Shari'ah, and, thereby, comes to perceive the latter not as it is, and was intended to be by Divinity, but as that which threatens the petty fiefdom of the nafs and which, consequently, must be avoided at all costs. The face of Shari'ah is stern and forbidding to no one except nafsi amaara or other like-natured modalities of being (e.g., Satanic forces).

The Shari'ah does not 'demand' that people follow it or face the chastisement of Hell. The Shari'ah just is.

What people do with respect to the Shari'ah is up to them. Whether people will face the chastisement of Hell is up to God.

The Qur'an and the Hadith both describe God as One Who is capable of forgiving all sins, including that of not observing Shari'ah. In fact, in the Hadithic literature, there are indications that God will show His independence of all things -- including the pious acts of human beings -- by admitting into Paradise some who have never done anything of spiritual value in their lives.

Does this mean one can ignore the Shari'ah? No, it doesn't, and one does so at one's own risk.

Nevertheless, the Shari'ah does not confront human beings with an ultimatum of: 'either follow me or go straight to Hell and do not pass GO'. The Shari'ah is intended as a source of mercy, support, guidance, strength, comfort, protection, blessings, peace, healing, knowledge, faith, sustenance, and growth -- not only for individuals, but for families, and the surrounding community, as well.

If one ignores the Shari'ah, then, one loses a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of, and make use of, the many resources that are contained within Shari'ah. In fact, those who ignore Shari'ah -- in one form or another, might not have to wait for the Afterlife to find out if they are headed 'south', for, quite frequently, Hell begins to seep into lives, families, and communities that have abandoned the help that Divine law offers them.

The Qur'an indicates that Allah does not change the condition of a people until they, themselves, - through intention -- have opened themselves to such a change (8:53). This works in both a constructive, as well as a problematic, direction.

Opening oneself to Divine Law is, God willing, a catalyst to further, constructive, spiritual change. Closing oneself off to Divine Law might be a catalyst for another kind of spiritual change.

Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, the promise of precedent mercy is not "lurking beneath" the surface of Shari'ah. The reality of mercy permeates the whole realm of Shari'ah.

Unfortunately, many so-called Muslims who consider themselves the custodians and guardians of Shari'ah, and, as a result, seek to impose Shari'ah on others, often lack all semblance of the mercy that is so evident in Shari'ah. Consequently, all too frequently, people begin to associate the disagreeableness of such self-appointed guardians with the Shari'ah itself, when, in truth, the former (i.e., the 'custodians') have nothing to do with the latter.

## 21-Theory

Page 11 - Chapter One: “According to the great Sufi theoretician Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), the divine mercy that gives rise to the universe is existence itself. The very act of bringing things into existence is an act of gentleness and kindness. The same point is made in terms of love in a saying constantly quoted in Sufi texts. “I was a Hidden Treasure” God says, “so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known.”

“God’s mercy and love give rise to the world, but there is an important difference between the two attributes. Mercy flows in one direction, from God to the world, but love moves in both directions. People can love God, but they cannot have mercy upon Him, only upon other creatures. When Sufis say that God’s love for creation gives existence to the universe, they quickly add that the corresponding human love for God closes the gap between God and His creatures. Human love makes itself known in sincerity of devotion to the One God. The greater the love, the greater the degree of participation in the divine image, and the greater the degree of human perfection. Hence, “love” is often taken as a synonym for doing the beautiful.”

Commentary: The author refers to Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) as a “theoretician”. The nature of this reference is rather obscure.

The term “theoretician” has a variety of ‘connotations’ and ‘denotations’. Connotatively, a theoretician is someone who often is considered to be impractical and a dreamer, and, therefore, an individual who is somewhat, or entirely, removed from reality. Denotatively, ‘theoretician’ has several possible meanings.

For example, a theoretician could be someone who builds conceptual systems or frameworks that might, or might not, be tested against empirical data through experimental activity. A theoretician also might be someone who is preoccupied with the hypothetical in the sense that certain assumptions are made and on the basis of those assumptions, certain statements are deductively, inductively or abductively generated that propose to specify what follows from the given premises.

This commentary is not the place for a biographical sketch of the life of Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him). However, as far as the connotative dimensions of the term “theoretician” are concerned, let it suffice, for the moment, to say that Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) was an eminently practical individual who went on a spiritual quest to

discover reality and was not at all given to being an idle 'dreamer' who was caught up with conceptualizing about, rather than knowing, the nature of reality.

With respect to the denotative aspects of "theoretician", Ibn al- 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) did not build conceptual systems, nor was he someone who developed hypotheses and, then, set out to test them. Ibn al- 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) was a spiritual explorer who was charting and chronicling the experiential nature of his journey. Two of his greatest works - namely, *The Meccan Openings* and *The Bezels of Wisdom*, were both rooted in spiritual experiences of an extraordinary nature.

Whether one considers these works to be flights of fantasy or an accurate reflection of authentic spiritual experiences, neither of these characterizations falls into the category of theorizing. Instead, Ibn al - 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) was focused on the phenomenology of imagination and was providing an account of what was manifesting itself through that phenomenological realm.

To use the term "theoretician" in relation to Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) exhibits, at best, a considerable carelessness in word selection. At worst, such usage is fundamentally misleading.

The author goes on to refer to "a saying constantly quoted in Sufi texts." -- namely, "I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known."

There is a reason why this "saying" is "constantly quoted in Sufi texts". It is not just an anonymous or unattributed saying, but, rather, it is from the tongue of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and this "saying" is identified as such by, among others, Ibn al- 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him)-- an identification of which the author was not only aware but which he had cited in one of his works on Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) -- page 66, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

In a footnote to the aforementioned quote on page 66, the author indicates ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) knew that scholars of Hadith considered the quote to be a forgery, but the Shaykh argued that the words of the Hadith had been received through kashf, or unveiling, while in the presence of the Prophet in the imaginal world. The footnote goes on to indicate that while ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) acknowledges this Hadith is not found among those transmissions that have been accepted

by the scholars of Hadith according to the usual methodological principles determining which attributions are to be recorded as authentic Hadith and which attributions are rejected, nonetheless, ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) maintains that the attribution in question is authentic.

Without wishing to become sidetracked in a detailed discussion of the methodology of Hadithic literature, there are certain principles that need to be noted in passing. First, the 'isnad', or chain of transmission, of a Hadith is very important.

Today, many of us are familiar with the legal principle that requires a 'chain of custody' involving material evidence must be capable of demonstrating that its integrity throughout the process of a criminal investigation has been maintained in order for such evidence to be accepted into a given court proceeding as valid evidence. Similarly, an 'isnad' is somewhat akin to a 'chain of custody' except in the former instance, what must be maintained is the integrity of the process through which a given saying, attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), has been transmitted down to the time of the person who is compiling a record of those attributions that are being accepted as 'authentic'.

There are a variety of factors that must be considered before an individual compiler of Hadith arrives at a judgment or conclusion concerning the 'soundness' or strength of a saying that is being attributed to the Prophet. For example, one consideration is the length of the 'isnad' or chain of transmission.

In general, the shorter the 'isnad' (and assuming there are no other counter veiling factors), the stronger is a particular Prophetic attribution's claim on being accepted as authentic. Obviously, the longer the 'isnad' of a given attribution, the greater is the possibility that different considerations affecting the integrity of the transmission process surrounding the attribution might arise and, as a result, undermine one, or more, links in the chain of transmission.

Another important factor that bears upon the acceptability and strength of a particular Prophetic attribution revolves around the moral and spiritual character of the individuals who make up the chain of transmission or 'isnad'. The methodological framework of all compilers of Hadith gives considerable emphasis to the importance of being able to rely on the

veracity of what is being transmitted from point to point, or person to person, in the 'isnad'.

If a given 'isnad' involves one or more individuals of dubious, questionable or unknown moral and spiritual character, then, this weakness might be sufficient to exclude the attribution from the collection of what are considered to be sound Hadiths. This exclusion is not necessarily because the attribution has been proven to be incorrect (it might, or might not, be accurate), but, rather, the attribution or saying is not acceptable because the process of transmission through which the saying has arrived at the doorstep, so to speak, of the one who is collecting Hadiths has not been able to satisfy the methodological conditions governing what constitutes an acceptable 'isnad' for that Compiler of Hadith.

A third factor that might affect whether a given attribution to the Prophet is, or is not, considered to be acceptable revolves around the presence, or absence, of independently established 'isnads' that, if sound, serve to corroborate one another in relation to this or that saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). All other things being equal, the more independent isnads there are which corroborate a given attribution or saying, the 'sounder' is the claim of that saying on authenticity.

A Hadith that is considered 'weak' is an attribution that has met the minimum methodological conditions of acceptability for being treated as authentic, but it does not enjoy the same degree of supporting evidence as a Hadith that is judged to be 'strong'. For instance, the former might have a longer isnad with no independently established chain of transmission that corroborates that attribution, while the stronger Hadith might have a shorter isnad and, in addition, might be supported by one, or more, independently derived isnads concerning the same, or a similar, attribution.

Sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but which have been excluded from a given Compilation of Hadith are not necessarily forgeries or inventions. In fact, demonstrating that a given attribution is, in fact, a forgery requires a stronger burden of proof than merely excluding a certain attribution because this saying was not able to satisfy the methodological principles that determine the conditions under which a Compiler is prepared to accept an attribution as authentic.

To be sure, the problem of 'forged' attributions was one of the factors that led to the rise of, and need for, 'official' compilations of authentic Hadiths.

However, most Books of Hadith did not get bogged down in trying to prove whether various attributions were, in fact, forgeries, as opposed to an honest mistake in which, say, someone misheard or misunderstood or misreported a given saying being attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Instead, the Compilers of Hadith merely stated the principles of the methodology underlying their process of judging the 'acceptability' of various attributions or sayings. Then, they went about their business of compiling those attributions that satisfied their criteria and excluded the rest.

The Compilers of Hadith were more concerned about judging an attribution -- which was, in fact, false -- as being authentic, then, they were worried about excluding attributions that might be true. They were prepared to err on the side of caution, and their methodological principles were designed to exclude attributions about which, for whatever reason, they were uncertain and, as a result, were not willing to issue a stamp of acceptability or authenticity with respect to such attributions.

In order for a scholar of Hadith to prove that, for instance, the attribution: "I was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be known, so, I brought forth creation", is a forgery, such a scholar would have to demonstrate that all isnads concerning this attribution were transmitted by people who either themselves knowingly invented a falsehood, or were aware that the attribution was false and passed it on to others nonetheless.

This cannot be done, so to label this attribution a 'forgery' is not methodologically warranted. At most, a scholar only can say that it does not meet the usual methodological requirements of this or that mode of compiling Hadiths.

In truth, even this lesser judgment cannot be made with any degree of rigor. As noted previously, two important factors in judging the 'authenticity' of a given attribution or saying, concerns the length of an isnad and the moral/spiritual character of those who are involved in the transmission of that saying within such an isnad.

Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) was reporting his experience with the Prophet, and, consequently, the isnad is as short as it can be -- a quality that lends to its strength and soundness. Furthermore, the fact this encounter occurred within the imaginal world cannot, in and of itself, be used to undermine the veracity of that experience, any

more than the spiritual nature of the Prophet's mi'raj can, in and of itself, bring into question the truth of the Prophet's experience when he reported what different Prophets had said to him during his passage through the different levels of heaven.

This naturally leads to the question of moral/spiritual character. In the case of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the answer is obvious, but what of the moral/spiritual character of ibn al - 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him)?

One must engage in the same kind of considered judgment concerning his life as one does with the life of any individual who is part of an isnad. If a person takes the time to examine the life of ibn al - 'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) on the basis of authentic source materials, including his writings, (and not on the basis of hearsay evidence or diatribes by those who have not examined his life/writings or have various ideological/theological axes to grind) such a person will have a very difficult time trying to demonstrate that ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) was not of the highest moral and spiritual character, and, therefore, one will have no sound, compelling reason(s) for arguing that the reports of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) concerning what the Prophet said in this respect is anything but true.

Someone, of course, could state they are not prepared to accept, as authentic, the 'Hidden Treasure' attribution recorded by ibn al -'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him). This is that individual's prerogative, but such a decision to exclude the Hadith in question has no special authority attached to it, and, simultaneously, there is a considerable body of evidence that could be offered in rebuttal to the soundness of such a judgment.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "God's mercy and love give rise to the world, but there is an important difference between the two attributes. Mercy flows in one direction, from God to the world, but love moves in both directions. People can love God, but they cannot have mercy upon Him, only upon other creatures."

To begin with, the author's way of stating things in the foregoing quote is not quite correct, and this is so in several respects. More specifically, the principle of tawhid encompasses, and governs, all levels of manifest Being.

While Divine 'mercy' and 'love' are prominent qualities throughout Creation, one cannot reduce tawhid down to being

expressions of just 'mercy' and 'love'. Tawhid gives expression to many attributes, names, and qualities, and everything is tied together by Divine Purpose.

When Divinity spoke of wanting the 'Hidden Treasure' to be known, no details are mentioned about the nature of such knowing except that, somehow, Creation is to have a role to play in this knowing process since that is why, according to the Hadith, created things were brought forth. Implicit in this Hadith is an unstated purpose -- namely, the way in which, and the extent to which, Creation is to come to know the 'Hidden Treasure'.

Consequently, 'mercy' and 'love' are not just being arbitrarily lavished upon Creation. Rather, the 'mercy' and 'love' are expressed in terms of, and are directed by, an over-all plan for bringing 'Hidden Treasure', love, knowledge, and Creation together in a certain way.

In other words, the created universe was brought into existence by a Divine *niyat* or intention in which 'mercy' and 'love', along with many other Divine Attributes and Names, are woven to form a rich, mysterious, subtle, complex, layered, deep, exacting, unified whole capable of bringing to realization the focus of the Original Divine *niyat* or intention. To single out this or that attribute as being the cause of the created universe is to distort the nature of the principle of tawhid in which all dimensions of that principle serve, and give expression to, an underlying *niyat* or intention -- an intention whose ultimate nature remains shrouded in mystery because we have no access to the Divine Essence out of which it arose.

After stipulating that the created universe arose out of Divine 'mercy' and 'love', the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* goes on to assert: "... but there is an important difference between the two attributes. Mercy flows in one direction, from God to the world, but love moves in both directions. People can love God, but they cannot have mercy upon Him, only upon other creatures."

Since Sufi masters maintain there is nothing in existence but the Real, and since the author acknowledges, in a variety of places, that what the shaykhs agree upon in this respect is, indeed, a central precept of the Sufi path, then, it follows that "creatures" are nothing but manifestations arising from the 'activity' of Divine Attributes and Names. If this is so, then, when "creatures" show mercy to other "creatures, this is, in truth, nothing but one manifestation of Divinity -- referred to as a 'creature' -- serving as a locus of transmission for the Divine quality of mercy with respect to

some other locus of Divine manifestation -- referred to as 'some other creature'.

From the perspective of the Sufi shaykhs, mercy cannot flow in any manner except from the Divine to the Divine. In other words, mercy flows from one aspect of the 'Hidden Treasure' to another facet of the 'Hidden Treasure', but the pathway along which the mercy flows is via the realm of manifestation that appears as the screen or veil of Creation upon which the Divine Attributes and Names project the shadow figures of different dimensions of the fixed form known as the 'Reality of Muhammad' through the command of 'Kun'.

There is a Hadith Qudsi that states: "O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. The son of Adam will say: 'O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? God will say: 'Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.' The son of Adam will say: 'O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds?' God will say: 'Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me drink, and you gave Me not to drink.' The son of Adam will say: 'O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds?' God will say: 'My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink, you surely would have found Me with him.'"

Any person who supposes the foregoing Hadith Qudsi is just a manner of speaking and nothing more does not understand the nature of tawhid. Had the son of Adam visited the ill servant, or given food or drink to the servant who requested these, mercy would have flowed from Divinity through the son of Adam to the servant of God and, therefore, back to Divinity who was, in each case, with the servant in need.

The principle of tawhid requires that the meaning of "with" in the foregoing Hadith is not a matter of 'twoness'. There is only One, and manifestation is an expression of that Oneness.

Surely, the above Hadith is about extending mercy to Divinity, but the adab of this transaction is to take the quality of mercy which Divinity loans one and permit it to flow through to the intended 'creaturely'

locus of manifestation that God is with. In the given Hadith, the creaturely destination of the mercy (in the form of visiting, food or drink) is a servant of God that Divinity is with, but, by analogy, the destination of the loaned mercy could be any of the creatures of Creation, for God is with all Creation -- otherwise such creatures could not be.

What is true of mercy is also true of love. Human love arises from, and is a reflection of (in part), the love that was inherent in the Divine *niyat* which gave rise to Creation.

Love, whether directed toward another human being or directed toward God, flows from the Divine to the Divine. This flow occurs through one, or another, facet of created manifestation -- facets or creatures or loci of manifestation that are the appearances generated through the activity of the Divine Attributes and Names in accordance with the original *niyat* of Divinity concerning the Hidden Treasure and Creation.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "When Sufis say that God's love for creation gives existence to the universe, they quickly add that the corresponding human love for God closes the gap between God and His creatures. Human love makes itself known in sincerity of devotion to the One God. The greater the love, the greater the degree of participation in the divine image, and the greater the degree of human perfection. Hence, 'love' is often taken as a synonym for doing the beautiful." Contrary to the author's contention, human love for God cannot close "the gap between God and His creatures" because, in truth, no such gap exists except in the mind and heart of someone who has veiled herself or himself from the presence of Divinity within all of Creation.

Many Muslims use the term "kufir" to refer to someone who does not accept and live in accordance with the pillars of Islam. However, one of the root meanings of "kufir" involves any hiding or covering of the truth.

While the Pillars might be one facet of the truth, the fact of the matter is, 'truth' both envelops, as well as extends far beyond, these Pillars. Indeed, from the perspective of the Sufi shaykhs, anyone who hides from himself or herself the truth of the Presence of Divinity within and around that individual is "kufir" in the most fundamental of senses.

Love is not something one can achieve -- that is, love cannot flow from humans to Divinity until love has first flowed from Divinity to human

beings. As the Qur'an indicates: "He (God) loves them, and they love Him" (5:54)

Love is a gift of God that flows to an individual. If the individual is open to, as well as ready for, this gift, then, such love flows through that individual and is re-directed along one, or another, pathway toward the destination of such love - whether this destination be another creature (i.e., locus of manifestation) or back toward the Source from which this flow arose initially.

In the quote given a half dozen, or so, paragraphs ago the author indicates that: "human love makes itself known in sincerity of devotion to the One God. The greater the love, the greater the degree of participation in the divine image and the greater the degree of human perfection."

In truth, and as indicated above, real love (as opposed to sexual excitement and/or emotionalism) is never 'human' per se. Instead, a human being falls into the stream of love and is swept along by its currents.

In the process, we become a locus of manifestation through which love is given expression. We become, willingly or unwillingly, a medium of transmission for the quality of love in the service of tawhid.

Although love might be manifested through sincerity, sincerity can be present in the absence of love. In fact, sincerity is, in some ways, a necessary precursor for an individual's spiritual 'readiness' for being open to love, if and when, the latter arrives. The quality of sincerity is like fertile ground that is capable of receiving a seed -- in this case love -- and helping to provide the sort of conditions in which the seed, if God wishes, will germinate, take root, and flourish.

When love descends upon an individual, the love tends to dye everything in the individual with the colors of that love. This is not so much a matter of human perfection (as the author tries to argue), as it is a matter of the re-formatting of all that is not consonant with the presence of such love.

God alone is perfect. However, when the various dimensions of spiritual potential, or 'fitra', within a human being have been properly calibrated and are operating according to 'specifications', so to speak, then, such potential can serve the principle of tawhid that ties 'Hidden Treasure', love, knowledge, Creation, and Divine purpose together, and this service will give expression to the full extent of the capacity inherent in that individual's spiritual potential.

Having one's spiritual potential operating to maximum capacity is not necessarily a matter of perfection. Rather, this is what constitutes being an 'abd, or servant, of God, since such an individual is fulfilling the purpose for which human beings were created – namely, as indicated in the Qur'an: "I have not created man nor jinn except that they might worship Me" (51:56-57), and a human being can only properly worship Divinity when this worship is manifested through a fully realized 'fitra', or primordial, spiritual potential.

Human beings might never achieve perfection, but they can fulfill, God willing, the purpose for which they were created. Human beings might never achieve perfection, but the Divine Plan in which they participate, willingly or unwillingly, is perfect, and we either fulfill the purpose of our creation within the context of that Plan, or we do not.

The Plan does not become more perfect when we realize the purpose of our individual existence. Nor does the Plan become less perfect if we do not realize this purpose.

The Plan is perfectly conceived and perfectly executed in and of Itself. The 'space' between the two terminal points of 'initial Desire' and 'Divine execution' is a 'time of opportunity' that we either do, or do not, take advantage of in relation to our capacity to do so.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "love' is often taken as a synonym for doing the beautiful." Even if one were to agree with this statement, nevertheless, since God is the Source of all love, then, clearly, the one who is doing the beautiful is none other than Divinity.

One who, by the grace of God, has realized the full capacity of 'fitra' does not so much 'do the beautiful' as much as he or she permits (in the sense of not resisting) the beautiful to be done through them. This sort of individual serves as a locus of manifestation through which Divine beauty can be given expression.

As important as love is, however, one makes a mistake when one supposes, as the author does, that 'doing the beautiful' can be reduced to just the dimension of love. In a Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) speaks of there being 300 Attributes of Divinity, and the Qur'an speaks of 99 Divine Names.

The 300 Attributes and the 99 Names do not exhaust Divinity but are merely what has been disclosed by Divinity through, respectively, the

Prophet and the Qur'an. Divinity is infinite, and, as such, constitutes a Plenitude that is without beginning and without end in every qualitative direction.

The nature of the Divine Niyat, Intention, or Purpose that brought forth Creation is, in a fundamental sense, shrouded in mystery. In other words, although we might understand, in general terms, what the original Divine Niyat involved (i.e., the bringing forth of Creation so that the Divine 'loving to be known' in relation to the 'Hidden Treasure' could be actualized), we do not know what any of this entails in detail.

At a minimum, some 300 Attributes and 99 Names inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure' are involved, for if they were not involved, we wouldn't have been informed about them, even in general terms, by either, respectively, the Prophet or the Qur'an. Furthermore, there well could be additional Attributes and Names beyond the foregoing that are part of what is to be known in relation to the 'Hidden Treasure' but which have not been disclosed in any form that is readily accessible by the generality of humanity.

Love is but one facet of whatever dimensions of the 'Hidden Treasure' Divinity wishes to be known. Love is but one of the jewels of the 'Hidden Treasure'.

Yet, notwithstanding the beauty of love, the Qur'an relates: "To God belong the most beautiful Names" (7:180). Therefore, 'doing the beautiful' can be done through any of these Names and not just through the quality of love.

Consequently, as great as love is, one would do a grave disservice to the incomprehensible richness, depth, sublimity, and subtlety of the 'Hidden Treasure' if one were to attempt to reduce the latter to the former. In fact, the qualitative magnitude of the 'Hidden Treasure' is beyond measure.

## 22 - Negation

Page 12 - Chapter One: “The Sufi view of reality derives from the Koran and the Hadith, but it has been amplified and adapted by generations of Sufi teachers and sages. It provides a map of the cosmos that allows people to understand their situation in respect to God. It sets down a practice that can lead people from their actual situation to the final goal of human life, or from imperfection to perfection.

“The first Shahadah - ‘(There is) no god but God’ - discerns between the Real and the unreal, or between the Absolute and the relative, or between God and ‘everything other than God,’ that is the universe. Traditionally, the Shahadah is said to be divided into two halves, the negation (‘no god’) and the affirmation (‘but God’). The first half denies the inherent reality of the world and the self. The second half affirms the ultimacy of the divine reality. The Shahadah means that there is ‘no creator but God,’ ‘none merciful but God,’ ‘none knowing but God.’ In sum, it means that there is ‘no reality but God’ and that all the so-called realities of our experience are secondary and derivative.

“Numerous Koranic verses and Hadiths reiterate the basic discernment contained in the Shahadah and explain its ramifications. One of the most often cited in Sufi texts is the verse, ‘Everything is perishing but His face (28:88).’

Commentary: The author’s foregoing claim that “the Sufi view of reality derives from the Koran and the Hadith” stands in need of expansion and qualification. Sufi understanding is drawn from direct experience of various dimensions of the ‘Real’, although, to be sure, one’s spiritual experience might be initiated through engagement of the Qur’an and/or the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

One cannot drink from the Qur’an or appreciate the Sunnah of the Prophet, until one is ready to receive, to whatever degree, the Truth to which both the Qur’an and the Sunnah give expression. As the Qur’an notes: “Be in the condition of taqwa (i.e., have the niyat or intention of a servant of Divinity), and God will teach you.” (2:282)

Before Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) became Muslim, he was an enemy of the Prophet. In fact, on the day he accepted Islam, he was on his way to the house of his sister to kill the Prophet whom he had heard was present there and who, in the opinion of Omar (may Allah be pleased with

him) -- at least at that juncture in time -- was leading people astray, including his sister, from the traditions of the Arabs that had prevailed prior to the advent of the Prophet's mission.

Just prior to entering the house of his sister, Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) heard parts of a few brief verses of the Qur'an being recited. Upon entering, he demanded to hear, again, what was being recited and to know what it was.

He was informed by his sister that before he could hear the recitation again or touch the Qur'an, he would have to undergo wuzu, or the prescribed manner of washing up in order to be prepared to engage in spiritual activities -- such as reading or listening to the recitation of the Qur'an. Rather unexpectedly, to say the least, Omar (may Allah be please with him) complied with this directive, despite the fact he had just entered a house in order to slay the Prophet and 'straighten out' his sister.

This process of compliance was an act of taqwa -- even though Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) probably did not consciously understand why he was observing the requirements of wuzu and some of the etiquette associated with the Qur'an. With taqwa came an openness or receptivity toward being taught by Divinity (as God promises in the Qur'an), and when he heard the Qur'an being recited after he had performed wuzu, his whole spiritual orientation began to change -- from being an enemy of the Prophet to a seeker after the truth that was being transmitted through the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Sufi shaykhs, through the Grace of Allah, teach taqwa. They teach seekers how to prepare and condition themselves spiritually in order to be 'ready' to receive whatever Divinity chooses to teach them.

In a condition of taqwa, the individual is open to that which is being referred to when the Qur'an says: "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that He is the Real". (41:53) The Qur'an and the Sunnah are among the Divine signs that are being shown 'upon the horizons', and direct spiritual experiences are the Divine signs that are shown within an individual.

A person, by himself or herself, cannot read the Qur'an or learn about the Sunnah (actions) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and, thereby, "derive" an understanding of the Sufi path. An individual, on her or his own, cannot travel the Sufi path.

The Qur'an indicates one should 'enter houses by their doors' (2:189). The door of the Qur'an is the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- not only because he was the one through whom the Divine Revelation was transmitted to the rest of humanity, but also because he is the one whom God invested with the most knowledge concerning the different levels of significance and meaning inherent in the Qur'an.

The door to the Prophet is love. In fact, the Prophet, himself, has said that 'no one can complete one's faith until the Prophet becomes dearer to an individual than that individual's family and all of mankind'.

In order to learn about loving the Prophet, one must have association with either the Prophet or with someone who knows what loving the Prophet entails. In other words, one must have association with someone who reflects, among other things, qualities of kindness, humility, sincerity, generosity, integrity, thoughtfulness, insight, forgiveness, forbearance, patience, courage, friendship, steadfastness, nobility, and gratitude -- that is, someone who is dyed with the colors of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and has become dyed in this way through loving the Prophet.

The door to loving someone who loves the Prophet is 'nisbath'. Nisbath is the bond of spiritual resonance that inclines a seeker to learn from a given servant of God, while simultaneously inclining that servant of God to teach the seeker who manifests signs of such nisbath.

The door to nisbath is adab or spiritual etiquette. Nisbath has its conditions and requirements, and those conditions and requirements must be honored if nisbath is to have fertile ground in which to take root and flourish.

The door to adab is initiation into a silsilah or 'lineage of spiritual transmission' at the hands of an authentic living locus of manifestation through which such transmission is given expression. In short, one needs spiritual assistance in order to constructively approach, as well as -- God willing -- gain maximum benefit from, the Guidance that is inherent in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Initiation, silsilah, adab, nisbath, the spiritual guide, love, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the Qur'an, and God are all brought together in the valley of taqwa. One must be spiritually ready to learn and receive. One

must have respect for, and humility toward, the process through which learning flows.

What one can derive, in relation to the Sufi path, from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet is extremely limited if, among other things, nisbath, adab, love, and taqwa are not present. To the extent these qualities are present, then, God willing, one can travel as far as one's spiritual capacity will take one with respect to what is to be learned through the Qur'an and the Prophet.

As previously noted, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that the Sufi view of reality "provides a map of the cosmos that allows people to understand their situation in respect to God. It sets down a practice that can lead people from their actual situation to the final goal of human life, or from imperfection to perfection." These statements are both problematic and misleading.

The understanding of a realized Sufi is not a map. A map is a representation of some aspect of reality, but the goal of the Sufi path is Reality, Itself, and not some modality of representation.

In addition, the cosmos is not something 'out there' for which one requires a map in order to find one's way around. Rather, the entire cosmos can be found 'within', and directly experienced through, our primordial nature or 'fitra' when the latter is fully realized.

Finally, as noted previously, the goal of life is not necessarily perfection. The goal of human existence is to realize the spiritual potential of 'fitra', for it is through 'fitra' that we have the capacity to know the 'Hidden Treasure' in the manner intended by Divinity when Creation was brought forth to fulfill the original Divine niyat concerning God's love for the Hidden Treasure to be known.

Is realization of fitra's spiritual potential perfection? Only Divinity knows the answer to this question, but whatever the answer might be in this respect, this is as far as we can go, for it marks the boundary limits of our God-given capacity.

Rather than aiming for perfection, that might be beyond human reach, we ought to reach for what is implicit in the Divine niyat or intention that gives rise to creation. In short, we should strive to know the 'Hidden Treasure' in the manner, and to the extent, that is consonant with the original wish or desire of Divinity.

In other words, if, by the Grace of God, one comes to know Divinity in the way that is indicated by Divinity, and if this turns out to be an expression of perfection -- in some sense of this word, then, all is well and good. If, on the other hand, perfection is not possible, then, coming to know God in the way for which God has provided with respect to human beings is to fulfill human purpose irrespective of issues of perfection.

The Sufi path is not just a litany of spiritual practices from which one can choose various 'ingredients' or practices, as if it were some sort of Spiritual Recipe Book, and, then, proceed to throw the selected practices together in various combinations in order to achieve spiritual realization. Practices need to be pursued within an appropriate (e.g., spiritually authentic) context if those practices are to be efficacious for, as well as not injurious to, a given seeker.

Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), who was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), once warned that if any person proposed to step onto the Sufi path without a teacher, then, such an individual had Iblis or Satan as his or her guide. Consequently, the appropriate context within which practices should be pursued is under the guidance of an authentic spiritual teacher.

A seeker does not know what practices to observe, or when, or how, or where, or under which conditions. A seeker does not know the meaning or significance of whatever spiritual states or stations might ensue from the observance of various practices. A seeker does not understand that the efficacy of a given practice is rooted as much, if not more so, in the way a teacher's nisbath concerning the seeker helps, by God's leave, to support, focus, strengthen, protect, and nurture such a practice, as its efficacy is based on the seeker's observance of that practice.

The author states: "The first Shahadah - '(There is) no god but God' - discerns between the Real and the unreal, or between the Absolute and the relative, or between God and 'everything other than God,' which is the universe." To begin with, and in contrast with what the author has said, the first Shahadah involves a 'bearing witness': 'Ash-hadu-an', that there is only one Reality, and not just a statement of '(There is) no god but God.'

Moreover, the first Shahadah does not so much discern between the Real and the unreal, or between the Absolute and the relative, or between God and 'other than God', as much as the Shahadah indicates that the 'unreal', or the 'relative', or 'other than God' have no existence. Being gives expression only to the Real, the Absolute, or Divinity.

'Unreality', the 'relative', and 'other than God' all constitute conditions of being veiled with respect to the nature of Being. These conditions of darkness or ignorance are possibilities inherent in the 'Hidden Treasure' with respect to the nature of the fixed form of created things, and, consequently, the purpose of making a declaration of bearing witness with respect to the one Reality is to give expression to a *niyat*, intention, or desire that relies on adhering to the Real to keep one from falling into the sort of error (i.e., conditions of 'unreality', the 'relative', and 'other than God') for which we have a certain inclination in the form of our *nafsi amaara* or carnal soul.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* goes on to contend that: "Traditionally, the Shahadah is said to be divided into two halves, the negation ('no god') and the affirmation ('but God'). The first half denies the inherent reality of the world and the self. The second half affirms the ultimacy of the divine reality. The Shahadah means that there is 'no creator but God,' 'none merciful but God,' 'none knowing but God.' In sum, it means that there is 'no reality but God' and that all the so-called realities of our experience are secondary and derivative."

If there is 'no reality but God', then, one cannot negate what has no reality. In fact, one cannot even understand the idea of 'no god' or 'no reality' except by first affirming 'God' or the 'Real'. In other words, what looks like a negation in the first part of the Shahadah, is, in truth, nothing but an affirmation of the Standard through which all issues are to be evaluated and judged.

Secondly, even if one were to accept the author's general way of stating things in the foregoing, he still doesn't state the matter correctly. More specifically, if one divides the first Shahadah into two halves -- one consisting of negation and the second half consisting of affirmation, in truth, the affirmation involves not only the starting point of Divinity, but an affirmation, as well, that includes the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who is the Rasul or Messenger of the Real.

However, if, as the author argues, the first part of the Shahadah means there is 'no reality but God', then, what meaning can be attached to the second facet of the affirmation being made during the process of bearing witness? In other words, if there is 'no reality but God', then, who and what is Muhammad (peace be upon him), and what does it mean to be a Rasul or Messenger of Divinity in such a context?

Toward the end of the extended quotation with which the present commentary begins, the author claims that the Shahadah means “there is ‘no reality but God’ and that all the so-called realities of our experience are secondary and derivative.” However, this way of saying things raises an important question concerning what it means for “the so-called realities of our experience” to be “secondary and derivative” -- that is, how does something come to be ‘secondary and derivative’ given that there is ‘no reality but God’?

The answer to this question is contained in the relationship between the two facets of the Shahadah that are being affirmed -- one facet which affirms the primacy of Divinity, and the other facet which affirms that “Muhammad is the Rasul or Messenger of God”. The answer to this question is also contained in the dynamics of the aforementioned Hadith Qudsi which states: “I (Divinity) was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be known, so I brought forth Creation”, and, in fact, this latter Hadith is really just another way of referring to the same truths to which the Shahadah is making reference concerning the following state of affairs -- namely, despite there being only the Real or Hidden Treasure, nonetheless, in some way, Divinity has made ‘space’ for the Messenger or for creation to be brought forth.

In what other direction can one plausibly go except to concede that the Prophet is a manifestation (of a yet-to-be-specified nature) made possible by the One Reality and that this manifestation is a medium of transmission for a message from Divinity concerning the relationship between the Real and the manifestation that the Real has made possible? In a sense, the first Shahadah requires an affirmation that leads to questions concerning the precise nature of that which is being affirmed.

If an individual is sincere in bearing witness with respect to God and the Messenger, then, this person also should be sincere in pursuing the questions that are implicit in what is being affirmed. As such, the first Shahadah provides one not only with an initial ontological and hermeneutical stance, but the same Shahadah also confronts an individual with a challenge that requires one to explore the nature and significance of the ‘dynamic’ involving: (1) Divinity, (2) the Messenger, as well as (3) the one who is affirmatively bearing witness to Divinity, in conjunction with the Messenger. Moreover, this challenge must be pursued in a context that specifies ‘there is no reality but God’, and, therefore, places

constraints on what constitutes an acceptable way of responding to the challenge in question.

According to the author, “Numerous Koranic verses and Hadiths reiterate the basic discernment contained in the Shahadah and explain its ramifications. One of the most often cited in Sufi texts is the verse, ‘Everything is perishing but His face (28:88).’ One can accept, as given, that “Everything is perishing but His face”, but this does not “reiterate the basic discernment contained in the Shahadah”. Instead, it re-raises the questions that are implicit in the Shahadah.

If “everything is perishing but His face”, then, what purpose is served by referring to the Rasul or Messenger? If “everything is perishing but His face”, then, why require that which is perishing (namely, the one who is bearing witness through the Shahadah) to affirm this? If “everything is perishing but His face”, then, what is the nature of not only that which is perishing, but the process of perishing itself, and, furthermore, what is the relationship between ‘His face’ and that which is perishing?

There is a connection between the Quranic ayat -- “everything is perishing but His face” and the Shahadah. However, much more is encompassed by this connection than a reiteration involving the sort of discernment that the author is talking about -- a discernment that, as pointed out in the last several pages, does not really reflect the character or nature of the Shahadah.

### 23 - Manifestation

Page 13 - Chapter One: “The primary discernment between the Real and the unreal, or between God and the world, is followed by a secondary discernment among the realities of the world. The second Shahadah tells us that ‘Muhammad is the Messenger of God.’ It follows that he is a clear, designated manifestation of the One Real. In other words, he represents God more directly than other creatures. He and the Koran for which he is the vehicle are guiding lights in the darkness of unreal things. More generally, all prophets have been sent to reveal God’s guidance and mercy to human beings, so revelation plays a special role in human becoming. Without the revealed guidance, people can only wander in ignorance and illusion, immersed in the unreal things that veil them from the truth.

“On closer examination, the distinction between divine revelation and all that does not reveal God is much more subtle than at first appears. The Koran calls its own verses and other divine revelations ‘signs’ (*ayat*), and it employs the same word to refer to the things of the universe. If the Koran is God’s Book, displaying His ‘signs,’ so also the universe is God’s Book announcing His revelations. It follows that the world and everything within it can be viewed from two points of view. In one respect, all things are ‘other than God’ and hence unreal. In another respect, all things are ‘signs’ of God and therefore real in some degree. Here then we have a further discernment of fundamental importance - between phenomena as ‘signs’ and phenomena as ‘veils.’”

Commentary: As indicated earlier, the first Shahadah isn’t a “discernment between the Real and the unreal”, it is pure affirmation concerning the point from which all issues proceed and the Standard against which all issues are to be judged. This is quite appropriate for the kind of ‘beginning’ or ‘starting point’ to which the Shahadah gives expression.

Secondly, if we accept the author’s rendering of the first Shahadah to mean “there is no reality but God”, then, the second Shahadah is not “a secondary discernment among the realities of the world”. This is so in several respects.

To begin with, if ‘there is no reality but God’, then, there are no “realities of the world” per se. In fact, any statement of this kind merely confuses the issue. Whatever the precise nature of the realities that are given expression through the manifest world, they are not “realities of the world”. The forms of the manifest world are a function of the dynamics of the Divine Attributes and Names, so the world is a ‘projected reality’ resulting from the way in which

the principle of tawhid weaves all levels of Being together to reflect the nature of the Divine wish concerning the Hidden Treasure, Creation, and knowledge.

According to the author, “The second Shahadah tells us that ‘Muhammad is the Messenger of God.’ It follows that he is a clear, designated manifestation of the One Real. In other words, he represents God more directly than other creatures. He and the Koran for which he is the vehicle are guiding lights in the darkness of unreal things.”

The foregoing seem rather confusing, if not confused -- especially when viewed against the backdrop of “there is no reality but God”. More specifically, on the basis of what the author has indicated to this point in his book, no proper foundation has been laid for asserting that “it follows (my emphasis) that he [i.e., Muhammad (peace be upon him)] is a clear, designated manifestation of the One Real.”

One might agree with the author concerning the issue of “manifestation”, but, in a sense, the statement comes out of the blue, so to speak, rather than clearly ‘following’ from the discussion that preceded it. After all, the author has just spent a number of pages arguing that the entire thrust of the first Shahadah is that ‘there is no reality but God’, that ‘everything is perishing but His face’, and that the first Shahadah is the line of demarcation between the Real and the unreal. Moreover, little, or nothing, has been said about ‘manifestation’ or where it might fit into the realm of the ‘Real’.

Even if one accepts the author’s contention that the Prophet is “a clear, designated manifestation of the One Real”, one would have no reason not to extend this way of looking at things to the rest of Creation. In other words, each facet of Creation should be characterized as a “clear, designated manifestation of the One Real” -- although in view of the special status that is being accorded to the Prophet through the second Shahadah, each such facet would constitute a different kind of ‘clear designation’ than would the Prophet.

Given the foregoing, the author is not necessarily justified in proceeding to claim that the Prophet “represents God more directly than other creatures”. There are several reasons for making this countervailing claim.

Firstly, manifestation is not representation. Manifestation gives direct expression, in some sense of this term, to a given level of the ‘Real’,

whereas representation uses something to stand in for the 'Real', and if we accept that 'there is no reality but God', then, there is no-thing that can stand in for the 'Real'.

Secondly, manifestation, qua manifestation, gives equally direct expression to the 'Real', and, therefore, one manifestation does not give more direct manifestation than do other manifestations. On the other hand, one could say that the qualitative character of one manifestation, relative to others, is different, or that the role and function of a given manifestation, relative to others, is different.

As such, the Prophet does not represent "God more directly than other creatures". However, the role that is assigned by the Divine Aspiration to the Prophetic manifestation within the context of the 'Hidden Treasure', Creation, and knowledge, clearly could be different than the roles that are assigned by the Divine Aspiration to other modalities of manifestation -- as the Qur'an states: "Some We have raised in excellence above others (2:253).

Within the short space of the paragraph quoted at the beginning of this commentary, the author shifts from speaking in terms of 'manifestation', to using the term 'representation', to referring to creation as consisting of 'unreal things'. This latter usage appears when he indicates that the Prophet "and the Koran for which he is the vehicle are guiding lights in the darkness of unreal things."

It is hard to understand what difference "guiding lights", such as the Qur'an and the Prophet, can make in relation to "unreal things". On the other hand, if those aspects of Creation that the author is designating as "unreal things" were manifestations with a Divinely given character or form that, under certain circumstances, could be open to the light of guidance being transmitted through the Qur'an and the Prophet, then, this is another matter altogether from the one that the author is describing.

The author goes on to assert: "Without the revealed guidance, people can only wander in ignorance and illusion, immersed in the unreal things that veil them from the truth." The author is assigning blame to the wrong 'culprit'.

The 'things of the world', that are manifestations brought into being by the Divine Command "Kun' (Be), do not veil us from the truth. We veil ourselves from the truth. (There are Hadiths that speak of how God has seventy -- some say seventy thousand -- veils of light and darkness that

have been sprinkled across Creation, but this is not necessarily at odds with the point being made now.)

The Prophet is reported to have said: "This world is maintained in existence by illusion". The Prophet also prayed to God for 'things to be shown as they really are'. Furthermore, the Qur'an indicates that "There is nothing that does not glorify Him in praise, but ye understand not that Praise". (17:44)

When, by God's Grace, an individual comes to understand, among other things, the manner of glorification inherent in all things, then, the aforementioned prayer of the Prophet -- at least in terms of the life of the hypothetical individual being considered here -- is answered, and the illusion, which previously had maintained 'the world' of that individual, disappears. This is an instance of unveiling.

It is our concepts, interpretations, beliefs, judgments, and understandings that are illusory. These are some of the primary forces maintaining our world in a state in which we cannot perceive the reality of things or how all manifestations are busy with glorifying God according to their individual modalities.

Dunya is 'the world' expressed in terms of the collective emotional, conceptual, sensual, and motivational entanglements of the *nafsi amara* - - that is, the carnal, lower, rebellious soul - of people in general. These entanglements blind us to the Reality that is present and, therefore, maintain 'our world' in illusion. As the Qur'an points out: "It is not their eyes that are blind, but the hearts in their breast". (22:46)

The author concludes his discussion at this juncture of his book with: "On closer examination, the distinction between divine revelation and all that does not reveal God is much more subtle than at first appears. The Koran calls its own verses and other divine revelations 'signs' (*ayat*), and it employs the same word to refer to the things of the universe. If the Koran is God's Book, displaying His 'signs,' so also the universe is God's Book announcing His revelations. It follows that the world and everything within it can be viewed from two points of view. In one respect, all things are 'other than God' and hence unreal. In another respect, all things are 'signs' of God and therefore real in some degree. Here then we have a further discernment of fundamental importance - between phenomena as 'signs' and phenomena as 'veils'."

The distinction that the author is drawing “between divine revelation and all that does not reveal God” is illusory. Since “there is no reality but God” and since “there is nothing that does not glorify Him in praise, but ye understand not that Praise”, then, contrary to the contention of the author, there can be nothing “which does not reveal God”.

Moreover, the author makes a mistake when he equates the ‘signs’ of the Qur’an with the ‘signs’ of the universe and, as a result, treats the latter as “God’s Book announcing His revelations”. Among other things, the error committed here is to confuse levels.

The Qur’an is the uncreated Word of God. This means that the origins of the Qur’an are from beyond the horizons of Creation, and, this means, as well, that the manifested form of the Original Book of Revelation that descends into the realm of Creation is an imminent ‘sign’ of that transcendent, uncreated realm.

The Universe arises from the Command of Creation “Kun” (‘Be’). In other words, the Universe is not the ‘Uncreated’ Word of God, but the ‘Created’ Word of God.

Although both the Qur’an and the Universe employ ‘signs’, these signs have different roles and functions -- despite the fact that both sets of signs, each in their own way, can help us to know the presence of the ‘Real’ if, God willing, we can be opened to the manner in which each set of signs gives expression to the ‘Real’. However, the ‘revelations’ inherent in the ‘signs’ of the Created Word of God are not the same kind of ‘Revelation’ as are inherent in the Uncreated Word of God.

If the foregoing distinction were not the case, there would be no need for the Qur’an, or any other Books of Revelation, nor would there be any need for Messengers. One merely would have to read the book of Creation, and, then, one would know who one is, and why one is, and how to proceed - - but such is not the case. Creation is in need of something akin to a Rosetta stone.

The Prophets, themselves, were not guided until Guidance came in the form of imminent manifestations of the Uncreated Word of God. On their own, they could not decipher the ‘signs’ of the Created Word of God to provide what only could come through the ‘signs’ of a Book rooted in the Uncreated Word of Divinity.

Consequently, Revelation has come, because the 'revelations' inherent in the signs of the Created Universe are not sufficient to guide human beings to the full truth concerning the purpose of Creation and human existence. The 'Revelation' of the Uncreated Word of God has a different role and function than do the 'revelations' that are displayed through the 'signs' of the Created Word of God -- even if they both point in the same direction and even though both complement one another as they are woven together through the principle of tawhid that governs Manifest Being.

From the perspective of the foregoing, the author is wrong when he asserts: "It follows that the world and everything within it can be viewed from two points of view. In one respect, all things are 'other than God' and hence unreal. In another respect, all things are 'signs' of God and therefore real in some degree. Here then we have a further discernment of fundamental importance - between phenomena as 'signs' and phenomena as 'veils'."

None of what the author says 'follows' in the foregoing, does, in fact, follow. There are no manifestations that are unreal -- there are only manifestations that are not properly understood and which, as such, constitute veils.

'Signs' of Divinity always remain 'signs', and things could not be otherwise. Unfortunately, human beings distort the significance of those 'signs' through the various entanglements of nafsi-amaara, and, consequently, we become closed off to their meaning ... and, in addition, even if such entanglements were not present, human beings would still need to be granted insight by Divinity ... removal of obstacles to vision is not necessarily sufficient for vision to occur.

## 24 - Signs

Pages 13 and 14 - Chapter One: “...each existent thing can be said to have two faces. These two faces are the ‘eastern face’ and the ‘western face’. If we look at the western face of things, we find no trace of the sun, since it has set. If we look at the eastern face of the same things, we see the sun shining in its full glory. Everything displays both faces at the same time, but the vast majority of people see only the western face. They have no awareness that everything is a sign of God in which He is disclosing His own reality. For them, the Koranic verse, ‘Wherever you turn, there is the face of God’ (2:115) is a dead letter. In contrast, the prophets and the great Sufis see the eastern face. They witness God in everything.”

Commentary: Once again, the author is setting up the issue in a problematic way. It is not ‘things’ that have two faces, but human beings. It is our modality of looking, or the ‘internal face’ through which we choose to engage the Divine signs, that plays a critical role in determining what we will, or will not, be open to seeing.

The Quranic ayat or verse that the author cites actually points one away from the position that he is advancing. This verse -- namely, ‘Wherever you turn, there is the face of God’, says nothing about, nor does it imply anything about, the existence of two faces in things.

Contrary to the suggestion of the author, this is a Face or sun that never sets. Moreover, it is a sun that does not show eastern and western faces.

In whichever direction we turn, the Face of God is present, but we either do, or do not, see that Face depending on our spiritual condition and what God permits -- and this seeing or not seeing (light and darkness, knowledge or ignorance) is inherent in the Reality of that Face. The locus of responsibility for being in a condition to be open to seeing the Face of God is with us, and seeing the Face of God does not depend on whether a thing’s eastern or western face decides to show itself -- although whether, or not, Divinity chooses to disclose a particular dimension of ‘Reality’ through a given locus of manifestation is relevant here..

According to the author, for the vast majority of people, there is “no awareness that everything is a sign of God in which He is disclosing His own reality. For them, the Koranic verse, ‘Wherever you turn, there is the face of God’ (2:115) is a dead letter. In contrast, the prophets and the great Sufis see the eastern face...” While there is truth in what the author says in this

passage, he apparently fails to see a very interesting question that is inherent in what he says.

If “everything (my emphasis) is a sign of God in which He is disclosing His own reality”, then, it follows that those who are not aware of this also are signs of God in which Divinity is disclosing something about His own reality vis-à-vis: the ‘Hidden Treasure’, Creation, and ‘loved to be known’. Furthermore, although, as the author indicates, “the prophets and the great Sufis” have, by the Grace of God, been opened to the presence of the Face of Divinity and, therefore, are witness to this Face ‘wherever they turn’, nevertheless, there was a time in the life of each Prophet and each great Sufi when this was not so.

In modern parlance, there is a ‘steep learning curve’ associated with coming to see the Face of God “wherever you turn”. Our initial condition of ignorance, the need for guidance, as well as the process of struggling to learn about the nature and causes of one’s ignorance through such guidance, these are all signs of Divinity.

Among other things, these are all signs of the Divine Plan that ties together: the ‘Hidden Treasure’, the bringing forth of Creation or created things, and God’s love or desire to be known. If God had wished for the ‘Hidden Treasure’ to be known both immediately and without any struggle, He could have done this, but this is not what was written into the Divine Plan, and, consequently, life is the way it is -- a Divine sign of a particular kind ... one that reflects the nature of the Divine Purpose inherent in bringing forth Creation, and one with which each human being must come to terms if she or he hopes to journey beyond ignorance concerning the reality of things.

## 25 - The 'Trust'

Page 14 - Chapter One: "Islamic anthropology pictures human beings as the only creatures who have freely chosen God over the world, the Real over the unreal, the East over the west. In the Koran, this free choosing of God is called the 'Trust.' 'We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and human beings carried it.' But, the verse concludes, they are 'very ignorant, great wrongdoers' (33:72). This suggests that they have failed to live up to their freely chosen responsibilities.

"Many would object that they have never made any such choice. The Sufis typically respond that the objection is contradictory. Every time we undertake the slightest volitional act, we have freely accepted our human condition as a given."

Commentary: The author appears to miss the obvious. The "free choosing of God" is not the 'Trust', although, certainly, the capacity for choice is associated with the 'Trust'.

"The heavens and the earth and the mountains" were all offered the Trust, "but they refused to carry it". Obviously, 'the heavens and the earth and the mountains' had some capacity for choice, or else the offer of the 'Trust' would not have been made to them as an issue of choice that they could refuse. Only beings capable of choice -- in however limited a manner -- could refuse an offer.

Whatever the 'Trust' was, the heavens, the earth, and the mountains were afraid of carrying its burden, and if the 'Trust' had been choice, then, they would have been afraid of doing exactly what they did--bearing the burden of choosing ... in their case, to refuse the offer being made.

The author has, himself, indicated in the foregoing quote that whenever even the slightest degree of volition is exercised, then, the one exercising that choice has freely accepted one's existential condition. 'Refusal' constitutes a choice with lasting ramifications, and these ramifications would have to be carried throughout the existence of the one making this choice -- namely, the heavens, the earth, and the mountains.

Moreover, the 'Trust' cannot be a matter of having "freely chosen God over the world", for, in refusing the 'Trust', the heavens, the earth, and the mountains were not choosing the world over God. They would remain the servants of Divinity despite their refusal.

The refusal was not an act of rebellion or defiance. It was motivated by fear concerning the nature of the 'Trust'.

The heavens, earth, and mountains chose refusal of the 'Trust'. This choice did not entail exhibiting a preference for the world over Divinity, or a preference for the unreal over the 'Real'-- in fact, they all proceeded to busy themselves with glorifying God -- a 'glorification' that, according to the Qur'an, we do not understand.

The author uses the term "Islamic anthropology" and goes on to stipulate that this alleged field of study "pictures human beings as the only creatures who have freely chosen God over the world, the Real over the unreal". The foregoing term (i.e., Islamic anthropology) is an invention of the author because Islam is a matter of what God has given, while anthropology is a purely conceptual creation of human beings. Consequently, to speak of an "Islamic anthropology" is a contradiction in terms.

Furthermore, the author is not only mistaken in the way noted above with respect to humans being "the only creatures who have freely chosen God over the world", but the author is also mistaken in another way in relation to the same issue. More specifically, 'jinn' are a category of beings who, like humans, also have been given the capacity to freely choose God over the world, and the Real over the unreal.

The Qur'an describes 'jinn' (one of whom became known as 'Iblis' after his fall from Grace) with a nature of, and origin in, "smokeless fire" (15:27), whereas human beings were derived from clay (7:12). Both jinn and humans have been given a capacity to develop spiritually, although the Qur'an indicates that human beings have been given a capacity for spiritual development that, in various ways, has the potential for exceeding the spiritual capacity of jinn.

In fact, this very dimension of spirituality that sets humanity -- at least, potentially -- apart from jinn and the rest of Creation is the dimension to which Iblis refused to bow. However, rather than taking on this issue directly, he focused on superficial rather than essential potential and, in the process, spoke of purely physical matters rather than spiritual ones.

The Qur'an relates how God addressed the angels at the 'time' of the creation of the human form (and, by the Grace of God, the spiritual condition of Iblis had been elevated to a point where the latter was permitted to not

only associate with the angels but to teach them as well, and therefore, Iblis was among those who were addressed by Divinity). God indicated to those who were gathered that “I am about to create humankind from potter’s clay, and that when I have made him and shaped him and breathed into him of My spirit, then, fall ye down in prostration.” (38:71-72)

The spirit being breathed into the human form, and with respect to which the gathered assembly was being commanded by Divinity to fall prostrate, was not the ordinary breath of existence that animates the bodies of humankind or that animates the being of other created things. Rather, the spirit being blown into the form of humankind constituted a special spiritual potential that was at the heart of the Divine Plan.

Divinity had loved for the ‘Hidden Treasure’ to be known, and to this end, Creation had been brought forth. Although all created things have been fashioned with a capacity for knowing the ‘Hidden Treasure’ according to modalities appropriate to each created thing, the zenith of the potentials for knowing the ‘Hidden Treasure’ had been breathed into the human form.

This potential is the ‘Trust’. Moreover, the challenge that accompanies this ‘Trust’ is as follows -- not only must the ‘Trust’ be returned to its Owner, as is stipulated in the Qur’an (4:58), but this ‘Trust’ must be returned to its Owner in a spiritually realized form so that the potential of that ‘Trust’ has been fulfilled vis-à-vis the purpose of Creation.

The heavens, the earth, and the mountains did not wish to carry the burden of the responsibilities entailed by the challenge that accompanied the offering of the ‘Trust’. They exercised their choice and refused the offer, while humankind exercised its choice and accepted the offer along with the latter’s challenge. Unfortunately, as the Qur’an points out, human beings, all too frequently, have proven themselves to be both “ignorant and great wrongdoers” with respect to the responsibilities inherent in the ‘Trust’ (33:72).

Free will, to the extent we have it, is a tool that can be used to either: (1) ignore or remain ignorant of the nature of the ‘Trust’ that lies within us and, consequently, doing nothing concerning its realization --thereby, committing great wrongdoing; or, (2) strive, with God’s help, toward fulfilling the spiritual potential of the ‘Trust’ and returning it to Divinity in this condition -- thereby, fulfilling the purpose for which human beings have been brought into existence.

In short, free will or choice can serve as an obstacle to the spiritual realization of the 'Trust' or free will can be used to seek the spiritual realization of that 'Trust'. However, free will is not to be confused with the nature of the 'Trust' itself.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, when Sufis are confronted by those who argue they don't recall being given an option concerning free will, the Sufis respond along the following lines -- namely: "every time we undertake the slightest volitional act, we have freely accepted our human condition as a given." In truth, the matter goes deeper than what the author indicates.

From the 'time' in pre-eternity when human spirits were given some degree of minimal awareness, the spirits of those who were destined to become human beings had been calling out to Divinity to show mercy and grant, among other things, choice. Divinity granted this wish, so it is we who asked for free will, and free will was not something that had been thrust upon us without our wishing for this to be so.

From the beginning, our 'fitra' was inclined toward free will. Divinity merely granted that toward which our 'fitra' was inclined. In other words, we have free will because we have a primordial capacity for it and also because we cried out for this capacity to be actualized.

26 - Shari 'ah

Pages 15 - Chapter One: "People need to discern between revelation and human knowledge, or between the Koran and merely human attempts to understand....

"In questions of discernment, the difference between the general Islamic viewpoint and the specifically Sufi perspective does not lie in principles, but rather in a certain self-conscious application of principles. The Sufis do not consider it sufficient for people to have faith and to submit themselves to the Sharia if they have the capacity of deepening their understanding, purifying their hearts, and doing what is beautiful. In order to reach human perfection, it is not enough to imitate others and follow religion blindly (taqlid). Rather, one must achieve a total awareness of the principles and the spirit that animate the religion, or as the Sufis express it, one must realize the Real Itself (takaqquq). On the theoretical level, the Shahadah becomes the concrete expression of the absolute reality of God, a sword that cuts away the illusory from the Real. On the practical level, the guidelines set down by the Sharia perform the same function, but here Sufis do not accept these guidelines 'because they must,' but because of their awareness that these play a basic role in allowing human beings to act in accordance with revealed truth and avoid error."

Commentary: How does one discern "between revelation and human knowledge, or between the Koran and merely human attempts to understand"? Stated in another way, how does one differentiate between instances in which one is imposing one's own interpretation on revelation or the Qur'an, and when, on the other hand, one is under the influence of 'guidance' in which one's understanding is being shaped, oriented, colored, organized, fashioned, and directed by Divinity?

According to the Qur'an, if one has 'taqwa' (that is, if one has proper humility, respect, adab, sincerity, and receptivity toward Divinity), then, God will teach that individual. However, how does one know when one has 'taqwa' and, therefore, one is 'ready' to be taught?

Moreover, even if one were in a condition of taqwa, how does one know that what is going on within one is a matter of Divine teaching as opposed to human judgment? How does one disentangle the machinations of nafs amaara and the presence of Divine instruction?

An individual cannot answer these questions on her or his own. A person needs the help of a specialist -- someone who, himself or herself, also has gone through such a process under the watchful care of another specialist who understands the nature of Deen and its relation to 'fitra' or primordial, human, spiritual capacity.

A Sufi does not discern on one's own, or differentiate on one's own, or achieve on one's own, or become 'perfected' on one's own. All of this is done in a teaching context between seeker and an authentic Sufi shaykh or spiritual guide via the Grace of God.

The author stipulates that: "In questions of discernment, the difference between the general Islamic viewpoint and the specifically Sufi perspective does not lie in principles, but rather in a certain self-conscious application of principles." Even if one were to accept this statement at face value (and one cannot do this, because, among other things, the author insists on distinguishing between "the general Islamic viewpoint and the specifically Sufi perspective" when the latter is inherent in the former), the author's statement doesn't really get us very far since it actually leads back to a variation on the sorts of question raised above.

For example, how does one arrive at the "certain self-conscious application of principles" to which the author is referring? In addition, one also would like to know what, specifically, lies behind the use of the phrase "a certain self-conscious application of principles" -- not only in terms of the degree and nature of such self-consciousness but, as well, the precise character of the principles that are involved?

The author contends that: "On the theoretical level, the Shahadah becomes the concrete expression of the absolute reality of God, a sword that cuts away the illusory from the Real. On the practical level, the guidelines set down by the Shari 'ah perform the same function, but here Sufis do not accept these guidelines 'because they must,' but because of their awareness that these play a basic role in allowing human beings to act in accordance with revealed truth and avoid error."

Surely, to say that many, perhaps most, Muslims have some level of awareness that the guidelines of Shari 'ah "play a basic role in allowing human beings to act in accordance with revealed truth and avoid error" does not overstate the case for the generality of Muslims.

Furthermore, just as surely, to the extent that such awareness is present, then, there is an 'imperative' dimension, or a quality of 'must', associated with this kind of awareness since inherent in this kind of orientation is the realization -- of however limited a nature -- that only through adhering to Shari 'ah can one know how to "act in accordance with revealed truth and avoid error."

This constitutes a basic understanding of the role that Divine Guidance plays on this level. Submitting oneself in this fashion is rooted in an acknowledgment (whose depth of understanding might vary from individual to individual) of a need for the kind of spiritual framework that is embodied in Shari 'ah and that one courts error whenever one abandons such a framework.

The fact that an 'imperative' force, or modal quality of 'must', arises from one's awareness of how things are on a certain level rather than being imposed on the individual from without doesn't advance the situation -- as far as distinguishing: the general 'Muslim' viewpoint from that perspective which is specifically Sufi, is concerned. For many Muslims, the importance of Shari 'ah lies in their acceptance of, or submission to, the idea that Divine law is a way of operating in accordance with "revealed truth" and, thereby, helping one to "avoid error".

Consequently, the sense of urgency for many Muslims concerning compliance with Shari 'ah comes from within and not, necessarily, from a blind following (taqlid) of what others in the community expect of them-- although, undoubtedly, this latter feature might affect the quality of a person's sense of obligation with respect to the Shari 'ah. In short, the author's way of distinguishing the general Muslim viewpoint from the "specifically Sufi perspective" does not seem to be all that compelling or clear at this point.

The author maintains that: "one must achieve a total awareness of the principles and the spirit that animate the religion, or as the Sufi express it, one must realize the Real Itself (takaqquq)." Again, how does the individual "achieve a total awareness of the principles and the spirit that animate the religion"? How does a person come to "realize the Real Itself"?

As noted earlier, the author claims "the difference between the general Islamic viewpoint and the specifically Sufi perspective does not lie in principles". Presumably, this means, among other possibilities, that both Muslims and Sufi begin with Shahadah, and that both Muslims and Sufi accept the idea of Shari 'ah.

Apparently, however, a Sufi, somehow, develops a different understanding or awareness of these principles inherent in Shahadah and Shari'ah than do Muslims in general. Somehow, apparently, a Sufi comes to see more deeply into these principles than do most Muslims.

How can this be? If the principles accepted by both the generality of Muslims and those on the Sufi path are the same, then, from where does the difference in awareness and understanding come?

One might argue, of course, that although both groups of people accept the same principles, nevertheless, differences in awareness arise because a Sufi works harder than the generality of Muslims, or because a Sufi is more committed than the generality of Muslims, or because a Sufi is more sincere than the generality of Muslims, or because a Sufi is more spiritually gifted than the generality of Muslims, or because of any number of such qualities and conditions. On the other hand, one also might suggest that the author is incorrect when he contends there are no differences between the principles accepted by those on the Sufi path and the generality of Muslims, and that differences of awareness and understanding might be traceable to principles that are active among those on the Sufi path but might not be operative among the generality of Muslims.

More specifically, one could agree that Muslims who are on the Sufi path, as well as Muslims who are not on the Sufi path, all begin with the principles inherent in Shahadah and the rest of Shari'ah. However, what about, say, principles concerning how one approaches Shahadah and the Shari'ah?

The vast majority of Muslims treat the Shahadah and the Shari'ah as a means to an end -- the end being construed in terms of either the attainment of Paradise and/or the avoidance of Hell. In such cases, the motivation behind, or intention underlying, compliance with the principles of Shari'ah is not necessarily because these principles help one discern between truth and error, but because adhering to the truth and avoiding error are grounds -- or so it is assumed -- for being granted access to the delights of Paradise as well as avoiding the terrors of Hell.

The principles governing the Sufi approach to the issue of intentionality and motivation in relation to Shahadah and Shari'ah are quite different from the foregoing. For instance, Ra'bia of Basra, a great Sufi saint, by the Grace of Allah, had a prayer that was along the following lines.

She asked God to deny her Paradise if she worshiped Him out of desire for Paradise. She also beseeched Divinity to throw her into Hell if her worship was motivated by a fear of Hell. However, she prayed that if she worshiped Divinity out of love for Him and Him alone, then, she asked that she be granted Vision of Him.

There is a clear difference of *niyat* or intentionality between someone who engages Divine Law out of love for Divinity and someone who is committed to Shari'ah out of a desire for attaining Paradise or avoiding Hell. In the first case worship becomes an end in itself, whereas in the latter case compliance with Shari'ah is a means to some end other than worship.

In fact, one might even go further than saying there is a difference in the principle of intentionality governing each of the foregoing cases. In other words, when compliance with Shari'ah does not involve looking beyond itself to some other end, then, such compliance is an act of worship, but when compliance with Shari'ah is motivated by a desire for something that is to be received in exchange for the compliance, then, this latter form of compliance might not actually be an act of worship.

The latter form of compliance is a sort of conditional contract that seeks some consideration -- e.g., Paradise, avoidance of Hell, Mercy, forgiveness ... something -- for various acts of submission. On the other hand, the earlier (i.e., Sufi) sort of compliance, gives expression to a kind of unconditional commitment that prays for vision of the Divine but which will continue to be busy with acts of loving worship even if the longed-for vision does not come -- that is what 'worshiping Thee out of Love for Thee and Thee alone' means.

Developing a 'taste' for unconditional worship, as opposed to conditional compliance, is a principle that takes time to acquire. Furthermore, in one way or another, one needs help in acquiring this sort of 'taste' -- help that goes beyond what is afforded through compliance with the Shari'ah.

This leads to another principle that tends to differentiate between the generality of Muslims and those who have stepped onto the Sufi path. The former tend to be of the opinion that one can come to understand all there is to understand about the principles of spirituality merely by: observing the five Pillars, and/or reciting the Qur'an, and/or reasoning about what one experiences, and/or going to school, and/or participating in religious discussions, and/or listening to a khutbah or sermon of the person who leads

the Friday prayer. Those on the Sufi path, however, do not believe the foregoing sorts of activities will be sufficient to realize all that can be realized in relation to the principles of spirituality -- those on the Sufi path believe that something more is necessary.

One facet of this 'something more' revolves around the establishing of a spiritual apprenticeship with a teacher who has been sanctioned through an authentic chain of spiritual lineage extending back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to give instruction concerning the way of Deen, the nature of 'fitra', and how these two are related to one another. This learning relationship is formalized through a process of initiation in which both student and teacher become committed to helping the seeker to fulfill the purpose of life through actualizing, God willing, spiritual potential and realizing the nature of one's essential identity -- the two main themes entailed by 'fitra'.

The way that "people need to discern between revelation and human knowledge, or between the Koran and merely human attempts to understand" is to apprentice with someone who has the requisite insight and understanding to help those individuals learn how to distinguish the 'taste' or 'dhawq' of revelation from the 'taste' or 'dhawq' of purely human 'knowledge', opinion, or judgment. One cannot necessarily acquire this sense of 'taste' from merely following an exoteric understanding of Shari'ah.

Of course, complying with Shari'ah does provide numerous opportunities for encountering a variety of spiritual tastes. Nonetheless, one needs qualified assistance to take full and proper advantage of such opportunities in relation to the realization of 'fitra' or spiritual potential.

This points to a third difference of principle between the generality of Muslims and those who are traveling the Sufi path. This difference revolves around the purpose of Guidance.

For many Muslims, spiritual Guidance is sent through Books of Revelation and the lives of the Prophets so that people might be pointed in a direction that leads toward felicity and away from ignominy, not only in this world but in the next 'world' as well. Generally, felicity is considered to be synonymous with one, or another, level of Paradise, whereas ignominy is equated with one, or another, level of Hell.

Sufi masters contend there is more to felicity than Paradise, and there is more to ignominy than Hell. In fact, the purpose of life is neither the attainment of Paradise, per se, nor the avoidance of Hell, per se.

True felicity lies in the realization of 'fitra' or spiritual capacity and essential identity. True ignominy is failing to realize this 'fitra'.

Spiritual Guidance pertains to the entire Path of Deen and not just to those aspects that bear upon Paradise and Hell. The Path of Deen might mark, at certain junctures, a way that, God willing, keeps one's soul away from Hell and which also passes through Paradise, but the Path of Deen does not terminate in Paradise. Rather, it leads to something transcending Paradise.

We have been created for the purpose of 'fitra' and not Heaven or Hell. We have been created for the spiritual potential that is inherent in 'fitra' and not for the possibilities that are inherent in Heaven or Hell.

Spiritual Guidance attends to many different levels -- from individual, to family, to community, to nation, to the universe. Shari'ah plays an important role on all of these levels, but Shari'ah, in an exoteric sense, is just one of many sets of methodological tools that are encompassed by Spiritual Guidance. There also are tool sets of guidance and methodology pertaining to the: heart, sirr (mystery), spirit (ruh), kafi (hidden), and aqfah (most hidden) -- all of which are part of the potential of 'fitra'.

In a sense, when we restrict spiritual guidance to being just a function of exoteric Shari'ah, Heaven and Hell, then, as important as these realms might be, nevertheless, we belittle the infinite vastness, richness, depth, subtlety, generosity, and awesomeness of God's original purpose of loving for the Hidden Treasure to be known through Creation. The Hidden Treasure consists of more than Heaven and Hell, or the pursuit thereof-- and herein lies a very deep, fathomless mystery toward which Deen leads, if 'fitra' is prepared, God willing, to do its part --"Be helpers of God." (61:14)



## 27 - Understanding

Pages 15 and 16 - Chapter One: “If Sufism is an appropriate name for doing what is beautiful and striving after spiritual perfection, then, it is built on two foundations - *islam* or submission to God (the practice of the Sharia and the prophetic model) and *iman* or faith (acceptance of basic Islamic teaching concerning God, prophecy, and the Last Day). Once seekers have gained sufficient grounding in these two dimensions, they can focus their efforts on ‘worshiping God as if they see Him.’ Eventually, sincerity and love might take them to the place where the “as if” ceases to apply. In other words, they will worship Him while seeing Him. An often cited model here is the Prophet’s cousin and son -in-law, who said, ‘I would not worship a Lord whom I did not see.’

“Like Sufi faith, Sufi practice is rooted in the Shahadah. Hence it combines two complementary perspectives - negation and affirmation, or ‘no god’ and ‘but God’. The ‘god’ or false reality that needs to be negated is the individual self or ego, the face turned toward the west and oblivious of the east. As long as self-awareness is dominated by the ego, people will not be able to see the sun’s light. Instead, they will perceive a multitude of shadows, false realities, and ‘idols’. In Rumi’s words, ‘The mother of all idols is your own ego.’

“The actual path of Sufism entails a process of inner transformation whereby the powers of the soul are turned toward God. Sufism adds to the strictly Shariite practices many devotional and spiritual exercises. The most important of these, around which the others are ranged as so many auxiliary means, is the ‘remembrance’ (dhikr) of God, that the Koran commands people to perform in many verses. Remembrance was taught by the Prophet to his close companions in the specific forms that make up the kernel of the Sufi discipline.

“The ‘normal’ human situation is one of forgetfulness and heedlessness. The least precondition for human perfection is to recognize one’s own imperfection and to remember the perfection of the one Reality. But in order to remember the Real in Its fullness, seekers must forget the unreal, which is the western face of their own selves and the world.

“In the Koran and in Islamic usage in general, the command to ‘remember’ God also means to ‘mention’ God, so the actual means of remembering God is the mention of God’s name (or names). The name is

considered to be the direct manifestation of the divine on the human level. Through a gradual process or transformation, the name fills up the mind and consciousness, leaving no room for remembering others. The basic insight here is that awareness is the fundamental reality of human nature, and its content determines who we are. As Rumi puts it,

'You are your thought, brother, the rest of you is bones and fiber. If you think of roses, you are a rose garden, if you think of thorns, you're fuel for the furnace.'

Constant focus on God leads eventually, God willing, to the goal of the Sufi path, which is 'union' with God."

Commentary: The author begins this section with a subjunctive or conditional -- "If Sufism is an appropriate name for doing what is beautiful and striving after spiritual perfection". According to the author, should the 'if' portion of the statement be true, 'then' certain other things are also true -- namely, that the Sufi path is "built on two foundations": 'islam' and 'iman'.

Of course, the 'then' aspect could be true, without the initial conditional being true. Alternatively, the 'then' facet of the statement could be true but in need of qualification, even though the conditional that preceded the 'then' clause is not true, and, in fact, this latter possibility is closest to the truth.

More specifically, 'Sufism' is not "an appropriate name for doing what is beautiful and striving after spiritual perfection", and this is so for a number of reasons. To begin with, this way of saying things denigrates, by implication, the vast majority of Muslims.

After all, if "Sufism is an appropriate name for doing what is beautiful", then, by implication, what non-Sufis do cannot be beautiful. Or, approached from a slightly different angle, if what non-Sufis do is also beautiful, then, one would have lost one of the qualities being cited by the author that supposedly permits us to differentiate the Sufi path from other kinds of spiritual activities, and/or the generality of Muslims. If the quality: 'doing the beautiful', is held in common, as well, by the activities of non-Sufi Muslims, then, one cannot use this quality to demonstrate how the Sufi path differs from what most Muslims do.

There is only one perspective that matters with respect to determining what is meant by, or entailed by, the idea of "doing what is beautiful". This perspective belongs to Divinity.

However, consider the following. Can one suppose that God considers the imperfect struggles of a human being to seek, worship, serve, or submit to the Truth as being anything other than beautiful?

Is 'doing the beautiful' only a matter of having achieved a lofty station of spiritual perfection, or does 'doing the beautiful' also entail the flawed stumbling of a being into which God placed, among other capacities, forces that were designed to incline that being to rebellion against Truth and the Real? Or, does 'doing the beautiful' encompass both, and more?

The parable of the 'prodigal son's' (or daughter's) return resonates deeply in the heart. The Prophet has indicated that Allah is more joyous over a human being's return to a path of righteousness after having been on a wayward course than is a shepherd who recovers a sheep that had been astray from the flock -- and one has to have some appreciation of how important the finding of an errant sheep is to a shepherd in order to begin to have even a hint of the joy God has in relation to the return of a wayward human being.

In truth, there is a dimension within us that is more like a sheep than we might care to admit. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, with respect to God's eagerness to meet up with us, that: "I (i.e., God) am more intense in My yearning to meet My servant than he is in desiring Me," but, unfortunately, like many sheep, a lot of human beings, when spiritually lost, don't seem to make much of an effort to find their Shepherd and seem content to just wander in the wilderness, 'baaing' away, until our very lives become endangered -- physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

In any event, being spiritually lost, and being spiritually found are fundamental themes in the history of human beings -- both collectively and individually. These themes cut across eras, civilizations, races, religions, ethnicity, language, and culture.

The Qur'an informs us that when the angels were witness to the creation of the human form, they could see some of the potentials that were being placed in that form by Divinity, and they asked God -- not defiantly but out of bewilderment -- 'why art Thou fashioning one who will spread bloodshed and corruption in the land'? God did not disagree with the observation of the angels, but said, instead: "I know that which you do not know!"

The Trust that was accepted by man -- ignorant and tyrannical though he would always prove himself to be -- was rejected by the 'heavens, the

mountains, and the earth'. They feared the enormity of the challenge or task entailed by that Trust.

Not everyone can be a Prophet, or a Saint, or a Friend of God, or a fully realized human being, and as beautiful as these exemplars of spirituality might be, there is also a deep, abiding beauty to be found in the simple struggles of 'ordinary' human beings as they face and deal with -- however imperfectly -- a vast array of imposing forces, both within and without, that have been set in opposition to them by none other than Divinity.

God's capacity for forgiveness is said to be so enormous that even if human beings were suddenly to stop sinning and, therefore, no longer require forgiveness, nevertheless, God would create another species of being who would commit sin so that God could forgive these beings. Yet, human beings continue to sin, and God continues to forgive those sins, and there is a beautiful symmetry between human beings who are inclined toward sin and the One Who forgives those sins -- especially given that the One Who forgives those sins is the same One who invested human beings with competing inclinations toward sinning and seeking forgiveness.

There is beauty in the extraordinary deeds of spirituality that are given expression through the lives of the Prophets and Saints. There is beauty in the simple acts of flawed struggles that are given expression through the lives of ordinary Muslims and those who submit, as best as they can, to the Source of all levels of reality.

'Doing the beautiful' is what God does. It is what is given expression through many different kinds and qualities of manifested loci - - sometimes these loci are Prophets and Saints, and sometimes these loci of manifestation are 'ordinary' people who have 'chosen' to participate in the incredible saga of Creation with all its attendant struggles, conflicts, uncertainties, problems, questions, failures and ... sometimes, by the Grace of God, successes.

Aside from the activity of 'doing the beautiful', the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, says that another characteristic appropriate to the Sufi path is "striving after perfection". The 'striving after' part of this perspective is understandable since we all know what is involved in seeking after something that we desire, and, as well, we also know what is meant when, in the process of seeking, we are required to struggle or make efforts with respect to that which we seek.

However, the issue of 'perfection' is somewhat more elusive. What exactly is 'perfection'? What are the criteria of perfection?

Can a human being become perfect in some sense (and, if so, in what sense exactly?), or can a human being only aspire to be a witness to Perfection's Presence?

Are all expressions of perfection the same, or are there different levels and modalities of perfection? Is the maximizing of one's potential the same as achieving perfection?

When something is operating as it should -- without error or flaw and in accordance with maximum capacity -- we often say that this 'something' is operating "perfectly". However, there is no standard of excellence that necessarily is implied when one uses the indicated term in the above fashion.

In fact, this manner of speaking is rather tautological in nature. In other words, when one uses "perfectly" in the foregoing context, this is really just another way of saying that something is operating as designed or to specifications.

The 'something' could be a tool or machine that might be improved upon in any number of ways in subsequent versions of that device. Nonetheless, as long as the tool or machine performed as it was intended to perform and did so without problems and breakdowns during the operating life of that device, then, one might say that it performed 'perfectly' and, in so doing, committed oneself to nothing more than to say that it fulfilled its function.

Presumably, the author is alluding to something much more substantial and loftier than the foregoing sense of "perfection". On the other hand, until one knows what the nature of 'fitra' or spiritual potential is, and until one understands what Divinity intends with respect to the purpose and uses to which 'fitra' is to be applied, then, one doesn't really know if we are being challenged 'to be all we can be', irrespective of whether 'all we can be' entails a lot or a little, or if we are being challenged to strive for certain standards of excellence that have been established by God and which only a fortunate few might achieve.

In the New Testament, Jesus (peace be upon him) is quoted as saying, "Why callest thou me good, when God, alone, is good." Slightly different versions of these words are given in Mathew (19:17), Mark (10:18), and Luke (18:19).

If someone of the spiritual stature of Jesus (peace be upon him) can say such words, then, what about the rest of us who are far, far below the spiritual capacity and realization of Jesus (peace be upon him). Moreover, here, the theme is goodness rather than the more comprehensive issue of perfection.

There is a heroic ring to the idea of “striving after perfection”. However, there is also a possibility that such striving might be a lot like ‘tilting at windmills’ in which the self-deluding fantasies of a ‘noble’ calling distance an individual from contact with reality.

A Sufi shaykh of India once indicated there are two points associated with every human being. One of these points concerns spiritual origins, and the other point has to do with the zenith of an individual’s potential for spiritual ascension.

The shaykh elaborated on the foregoing framework somewhat by stipulating that while, on occasion, the highest point of spiritual ascent for a non-Prophet might rise above the ‘point of origin’ of this or that Prophet, under no circumstances could the highest ‘point of spiritual ascent’ of a non-Prophet ever begin to remotely approach the ‘point of spiritual ascent’ of any of the Prophets.

If, for the sake of discussion, one were to define ‘the highest point of spiritual ascent of the Prophets’ as a standard of perfection, then, clearly, from the perspective of the aforementioned shaykh, no non-Prophet, irrespective of how high the latter’s point of spiritual ascent might be, could ever attain, or even nearly attain, the standard of perfection established by the spiritual ascent of any of the Prophets. If this is so, then, where does this leave the author’s statement that, among other things, the Sufi path is about ‘striving after perfection’?

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that one of the foundations on which the life of a Sufi rests is the “prophetic model” -- referring primarily to the example set by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but, by implication, including the example set by any of those individuals who were entrusted by Divinity with the Prophetic mission. However, is there any sincere Sufi who would be so arrogant and ignorant as to assume that whatever the nature of the spiritual activity in which they were engaged might be, that such activity could be said to be instituting the ‘prophetic model’ in his or her life?

Of course, there is a sense in which one follows, as best one can, what one knows about, and understands of, the 'prophetic model'. Thus, the Prophet said prayers, so, we say prayers, and the Prophet fasted, so, we fast, and the Prophet went on Hajj, so, we go on Hajj.

Nonetheless, our prayers are not the prayers of the Prophet. Nor are our fasts the fasts of the Prophet. And, our Hajj is not the Hajj of the Prophet. Nor are any of the acts that one might pursue in an attempt to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet the same as his actions.

Our niyat or intention is of a different, lower quality than is his. In addition, the condition of concentration, awareness, understanding, commitment, sincerity, love, submission, taqwa, and so on with which we follow the Sunnah of the Prophet is altogether different than the condition of concentration and so on out of which the Prophet gave expression to the actions that are recorded as his Sunnah.

One could, as the author suggests, 'strive after' the 'prophetic model of perfection'. Yet, this sort of striving would be like the mathematical concept of the 'asymptote' in which no matter how rigorously and valiantly one's efforts might be to approach the standard of the 'prophetic model', one could never reach that point of perfection.

Moses Maimonides, a Spanish Rabbi of the twelfth-thirteenth century, once said something along the following lines. He proposed that God would not hold Moses Maimonides responsible for failing to live up to the capabilities of Prophet Moses (peace be upon him), but, rather, he, the Rabbi, would be held accountable for failing to live up to the capabilities of Moses Maimonides.

The Qur'an indicates that God will not hold any soul accountable for what is beyond that soul's capacity to bear (2:286). In short, souls will be judged in accordance with that which is within a soul's capacity and not for that which is beyond such a capacity.

Consequently, if 'striving after perfection' is part of the Sufi path, then, seemingly, the nature of perfection might vary from capacity to capacity. Moreover, given the foregoing considerations, then, perfection -- to whatever extent this notion is relevant to the spiritual quest of humans -- might, after all (and as previously suggested), be a matter of each person's journey toward realizing her or his primordial, spiritual potential or 'fitra' -- however limited or expansive this might be in any given case.

There is a saying among Sufi shaykhs that manifestation never repeats itself. Underlying this contention is an insight into a certain dimension of the Divine Plenitude. According to this understanding, once a given manifestation appears, no succeeding manifestation will duplicate or repeat the earlier manifestation in precisely the same way since each expression of the Divine Plenitude is qualitatively unique.

Each 'fitra', or spiritual capacity, is a unique expression of the Divine Plenitude. In striving after the realization of this 'fitra', one might, or might not, be seeking perfection in some sense, but whatever the nature of one's fitra is, it encompasses a spiritual capacity that will never be manifested again, and, herein lies a huge responsibility and challenge that can be tied directly to the relationship of Creation, the Hidden Treasure, and Divinity's aspiration to be known.

By characterizing the Sufi path as involving both: 'doing the beautiful' as well as 'striving after perfection', the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* creates the impression--perhaps unwittingly --that whatever 'doing the beautiful' is about, it is not a matter of perfection, while simultaneously suggesting that whatever 'perfection' might be, nevertheless, apparently, it is not necessarily beautiful. One is left with this impression because the author seems to be treating 'doing the beautiful' and 'striving after perfection' as separate kinds of activity -- at least, one does not find any clear statement in the author's book that either equates 'doing the beautiful' with 'striving after perfection' or that outlines how the two kinds of activity are functionally related to one another.

Possibly, one reaches perfection only through doing the beautiful, or, alternatively, one might attain the station of 'doing the beautiful' only through 'striving after perfection'. If either of these possibilities is what the author intends, then, such an intention would appear to be lost somewhere in this choice of wording.

In any event, after conditionally proposing, in a sort of rhetorical fashion, that 'doing the beautiful' and 'striving after spiritual perfection' are each subsumed under the name of Sufism, the author goes on to state that both of these activities are built on a foundation of '*islam*' and '*iman*'. Parenthetically, he elaborates on the latter as a matter of: acceptance of basic Islamic teaching concerning God, prophecy, and the Last Day.

There are several problems with the author's foregoing elaboration of '*iman*'. First of all, faith is not merely an expression of "acceptance" per se.

Rather faith is the experiential grounds (including insight and kashf or unveiling) for something being accepted as true. Acceptance arises out of faith, not the other way around.

Furthermore, the more spiritually substantial that the experiential nature of the foregoing sort of grounds is, the deeper is the nature of one's 'acceptance' of the understanding or light that is being manifested through such faith. As previously noted, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stipulated that faith must involve not only a profession of the tongue and action of the limbs, but, as well -- and possibly most importantly -- a verification in the heart.

Faith is a process of verification concerning the way truth is given expression through some dimension of reality. As such, it involves much, much more than just the act of 'acceptance' that is indicated by the author of the book in question.

A second problem with the author's parenthetical elaboration of 'iman' is his use of the term "prophecy". The primary Biblical rendering of 'prophecy' generally involves references to anyone who was considered to be speaking under Divine influence. However, the term also carries a meaning that has to do with the uttering of Divinely inspired predictions about certain events concerning the 'future'.

The latter sense tends to have greater currency in the minds of most people in the West today than does the aforementioned, primary, Biblical usage, and, therefore, using the term 'prophecy' might mislead people to suppose that the role of a Prophet is just a matter of someone making prognostications about the future. Yet, even if one were to restrict oneself to the primary Biblical usage of 'prophecy' as referring to anyone who is believed to be delivering Divinely influenced discourse, there still is room for misunderstanding, since a Saint might express words that are Divinely influenced, in some way, and, yet, this does not make the Saint a Prophet of God.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has indicated there are 46 parts to Prophethood. The Divine unveiling of some aspect of the future to a given Prophet constitutes only a very small fraction of the Prophetic mission.

In addition, Islam distinguishes between a 'rasul' and a 'nabi'. The former (i.e., 'rasul') is someone who not only has been called to Prophethood by

God but, as well, has been given a Book of Revelation such as the Qur'an, Gospel, Torah, or Psalms, whereas the latter -- that is, a 'nabi' -- refers to an individual who has been called to Prophethood but has not been given a specific Book of Revelation to convey to the community or nation.

Consequently, to describe an individual in Biblical terms as someone who gives discourses that are Divinely influenced, might, or might not, mean the same thing as does 'rasul' or 'nabi' in the Islamic spiritual tradition. Much would depend on the particulars of what was being said, and who was saying it, and in accordance with what spiritual authority.

Contrary to the impression given by the author, 'iman' is not just an acceptance of 'prophecy' in either of the foregoing senses of this term. Among other things, 'iman', or faith, involves a spectrum of possible levels of spiritual understanding -- depending on what has been verified in one's heart -- concerning: the entire 124,000 member Prophetic tradition, together with all 46 parts of the Prophetic mission, as well as the distinction between 'rasul' and 'nabi'.

After proposing that 'doing the beautiful' and striving after spiritual perfection' might be inherent to the nature of the Sufi path, and, then, maintaining that both of these activities are built on a foundation consisting of 'islam' (submission) and 'iman' (faith), the author continues by saying: "once seekers have gained sufficient grounding in these two dimensions, they can focus their efforts on 'worshiping God as if they see Him.' Eventually, sincerity and love might take them to the place where the "as if" ceases to apply. In other words, they will worship Him while seeing Him." There are a number of questions that tend to arise in relation to these statements of the author.

For instance, what is meant by "once seekers have gained sufficient grounding in these two dimensions" (i.e., islam and iman)? What are the criteria of "sufficient grounding"?

Is the relationship of 'islam', 'iman' and 'ihsan' (worshiping God as if one sees Him) a linear process that must follow a particular sequence of stages, so that, say, first there is islam, and, then, iman, and then, and only then, ihsan? Or, is the relationship among these three more dynamic and non-linear such that each of these can shape, influence, and impact upon any of the others at different junctures and under different spiritual states and conditions without necessarily having to progress through a specific set of stages?

Consider the case of an individual who was not born into a Muslim family but who, at some juncture in life, decides to accept Islam. The ways of arriving at such a turning point are, perhaps, too numerous to count, and, therefore, one cannot suppose there is a common set of steps followed by each and every person who decides to become Muslim.

Furthermore, one cannot assume that any individual who decides to become Muslim -- that is, one who accepts Islam -- necessarily begins with the 'pillars' of Islam. For some, a light of faith might have been cast into their hearts by Divinity, and it is the force of this encounter with one of the lights of faith that might have inclined such individuals to accept Islam. Alternatively, certain individuals might have been blessed with a deep and abiding sense of being in the Presence of Divinity, and for these people, their first steps on the Path of Deen might be various expressions of *ihsan*.

Whether an individual becomes Muslim or is born into a Muslim family, the relationships among '*islam*', '*iman*' and '*ihsan*' are more likely, than not, to be complex, dynamic, and non-linear in character. In other words, for many Muslims, currents of '*iman*' flow into both '*islam*' and '*ihsan*', while observance of the Pillars of Islam might generate spiritual currents that lead toward both '*iman*' as well as '*ihsan*', or being in a condition of '*ihsan*', even if only momentarily, might strengthen and lend support to both '*iman*' and '*islam*'.

For purposes of instruction, one can -- as the previously cited Hadith involving the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Archangel Gabriel (Peace be to him), and some of the Companions demonstrated -- distinguish, conceptually, '*islam*', '*iman*' and '*ihsan*'. Experientially, however, these three might come together in complex and subtle combinations to generate a variety of spiritual conditions, states, and stations that cannot necessarily be assayed -- conceptually or otherwise -- with sufficient precision to know what any of the three aspects of Deen are contributing to a given condition, state or station.

Similarly, an individual's spiritual knowledge and/or insight might be shaped, colored, and oriented in different ways, and to different degrees, by experiences derived through, respectively, '*islam*', '*iman*' and '*ihsan*'. However, once again, we might be unable to determine what the individual contribution of each of these facets of Deen might be with respect to a given state of knowledge or insight, yet, this inability does not, in and of itself, invalidate such knowledge, any more than the aforementioned inability to

analytically break down the realm of experience into separate compartments consisting of the individual contributions of 'islam', 'iman', or 'ihsan' invalidates one's experience.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) told the Companions that the stranger who had appeared among them that day was Archangel Gabriel (peace be to him) and that the latter had come in order to teach the Companions their Deen. If this is so, and we believe that it is, why should the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* assume that 'ihsan' (i.e., striving to worship God as if one saw Him, but even if one is not able to do this, to know that, nonetheless, God sees the individual) is something that stands apart from, and is spiritually more 'elevated' than, either 'islam' or 'iman'?

There are different levels of 'islam', just as there are different levels of 'iman' and 'ihsan'. The 'islam' of the Prophet is greater than the 'islam' of the Companions, just as the 'islam' of the Companions is greater than the 'islam' of later generations of Muslims, and just as the 'islam' of some 'ordinary' Muslims is greater than the 'islam' of certain other 'ordinary' Muslims. The same kinds of distinctions hold in relation to 'iman' and 'ihsan'.

Contrary to the author's suggestion that 'ihsan' enters the spiritual picture only after "seekers have gained sufficient grounding" in 'islam' and 'iman', a very strong case might be made for a perspective that is very different from -- in fact almost the opposite of -- the position taken by the author. More specifically, for many people, long before they ever comply with the five Pillars of Islam and long before they know much about the articles of faith, Deen might begin with a very strong sense that God is aware of all that one thinks, feels, and does.

When these individuals make their informal supplications to God, they do not necessarily pray as if God is removed from their lives. When they seek forgiveness for their transgressions against themselves and others, they are not seeking forgiveness from One Who is not Present.

They make supplications and seek forgiveness because they believe deeply in the very core of their being that God is present and that Divinity listens. These individuals might, or might not, be faithful to observing all the Pillars of Islam in a thorough and steadfast manner, and their level of faith might waver, but they make supplications and seek forgiveness 'as if they could see God or 'as if they know -- on some level, in some way -- that God sees them.

Of course, there are higher levels of 'ihsan' than the foregoing observations suggest, and, undoubtedly, these latter states and stations are what the author has in mind when he cites statements such as the one he attributes to Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) -- namely, "I would not worship a Lord whom I did not see." Similarly, one could refer to statements like that of Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), a close Companion of the Prophet, who is reported to have said that he 'did not see anything [e.g., of the Created world] without also seeing Divinity'.

These sort of statements notwithstanding, to suggest, as the author does, that 'ihsan' only enters into worship after 'islam' and 'iman' have become firmly established seems to be incorrect. More correct, perhaps, is the contention that elements of 'islam', 'iman' and 'ihsan' are often present together, and interacting with one another, from a very early stage -- although, to be sure, these elements might be present in only incomplete and rudimentary forms.

Let us return, however, to the issue of 'seeing' God that is part of the answer that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave to Archangel Gabriel (Peace be to him). The author gives emphasis to this process of 'seeing', but, unfortunately, does not devote much attention to exploring what this process might involve.

What does it mean to 'see God'? What is the process of 'seeing' that is involved? Is it a physical seeing, or a seeing with the heart, or the *sirr*, or the spirit, or *kafi*, or the *aqfah*, or some combination thereof? Are different kinds of "seeing" involved when different modalities of vision (e.g., eyes, mind, heart, *sirr*, etc.) are involved? Does the station of 'ihsan' involve one kind of 'seeing', while other spiritual stations involve other kinds of seeing?

There is a Hadith Qudsi in which God says, through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "My believing servant does not cease to draw nigh unto Me with acts of his free-will offering until I love him, and when I love him, I am the eyes with which he sees, and the ears with which he hears, and the feet whereon he walks". When, by the Grace of God, a servant of God attains this spiritual station, is 'seeing with the eyes of Divinity' the same as 'seeing Divinity'? Is the seeing of one who is loved by God in the above sense, the same kind of seeing as 'ihsan'?

Is it possible to see other than Divinity when seeing with the 'eyes of Divinity'? Is it possible to see other than Divinity -- regardless of circumstances, although some people are aware, to varying degrees, of what is

going on, while others are blind to the nature of what is being seen and/or the nature of the 'seeing' process?

The author contends that "eventually, sincerity and love might take them to the place where the "as if" ceases to apply. In other words, they will worship Him while seeing Him." The author has indicated that 'ihsan' presupposed that a firm foundation of 'islam' and 'iman' have been established, but now he is speaking in terms of 'sincerity' and 'love'.

Where do 'sincerity' and 'love' come from? Are 'sincerity' and 'love' species or states or stations of islam and/or iman?

Missing from the author's discussion at this juncture is any mention of the relationship between the shaykh and the seeker, or the role of the shaykh. It has been said by a Sufi teacher that however great might be the service of a seeker to the shaykh, greater still is the service of the shaykh to the seeker.

Islam, iman, ihsan, sincerity, love -- along with so many other spiritual states and stations -- are not the achievements of individuals working in isolation. The Sufi path is not synonymous with the sort of 'rugged individualism' with which much of the West is so enamored.

As one of the great friends of Divinity, Hazrat Abd al-Qadir Jilani (may Allah be pleased with him), once said: "I did not reach Allah by standing up at night, nor by fasting in the day, nor by studying knowledge. I reached Allah by generosity, humility and soundness of the heart." The shaykh said this not because he failed to pray through the night, or fast during the day, or study the Qur'an and Sunnah, but because the insight of the shaykh's heart was sound, and, therefore, he understood night vigils, fasts, and study as purely secondary, causal manifestations.

The real moving force of spiritual transformation was Divine generosity, together with humility on the part of the one who was the recipient of this Divine beneficence. The aforementioned acts of night vigil, fasting and study were made possible by Divinity in relation to an individual (i.e., Hazrat Jilani [may Allah be pleased with him]) who had the appropriate taqwa (for which humility is very necessary) to understand Who was giving and buttering his spiritual bread.

From the time a person sets foot on the Sufi path -- and, in truth, even before this point -- it is the spiritual himma or focused aspiration of the

teacher upon the seeker that, by the Grace of God, brings to maturity and fruition the different spiritual states and stations of the seeker.

The himma or aspiration of the teacher with respect to the seeker is but a reflection of the Divine Himma that is underwriting all Created beings and their *raison d'être* or purpose in being. Indeed, there is ever only one Teacher or Shaykh, but the teaching is transmitted through a variety of loci of manifestation -- from Books of Revelation, to the 'Reality of Muhammad', to the Prophetic tradition, to the spiritual lineages known as 'silsilahs', to the 'fitra' of individuals, to the signs on the horizons.

The authentic spiritual guide with whom the seeker takes initiation has a spiritual himma with respect to the seeker that resonates with, and gives expression to, the Divine Himma concerning the fulfillment of that seeker's purpose for being brought into Created being. In this regard, the Qur'an indicates: "Those who swear allegiance to thee swear allegiance in truth to God. God's hand is above their hands." (48:10)

While the foregoing Quranic ayat does refer to the time when Companions of the Prophet swore their allegiance to the Prophet at al-Hudaibiyah, outside of Mecca, it also refers, by analogy, to the swearing of allegiance that takes place when an individual becomes initiated into a spiritual teaching relationship with an authentic shaykh. What was true at al-Hudaibiyah, is also true at occasions of Sufi initiation -- namely, the one who is swearing allegiance is, in truth, swearing allegiance to God and God's hand is above the hands of those who are involved in the ceremony of allegiance.

Furthermore, just as God's hand is above their hands, God's Himma is above their hands, and this Himma is given expression through, among other loci of manifestation, the himma of the shaykh toward the seeker throughout the seeker's journey on the spiritual path. So, great indeed, is the service of the shaykh to the seeker.

Someone has likened the himma of a shaykh, vis-à-vis the seeker, to the gaze of a certain kind of bird that concentrates on its eggs from a distance, and, in time, through the force of that bird's concentration, the egg comes to hatch. Similarly, through the focus of an authentic shaykh's himma -- that, as previously noted, is a manifestation of Divine Himma -- then, over time, a certain barakah, or spiritual Grace, is transmitted, by the permission of Allah, to the 'egg-ling' or seeker. Eventually, if God wishes, the egg-ling hatches into one, or another, station of spirituality.

With God's permission, this barakah flows into islam, iman, ihsan, sincerity, love, and many other conditions. So, although from the seeker's side of things, efforts are being made, struggles are being engaged, difficulties are being endured, temptations are being resisted, austerities are being performed, remembrance is being observed, and so on, nevertheless, these activities -- necessary though they might be -- only come to fruition, if God wishes, by virtue of the gaze of Himma, as manifested through the shaykh's relationship with the seeker.

The 'nisbath' of the seeker with respect to the shaykh is, in certain ways, the mirror image of the shaykh's himma with respect to the seeker. 'Nisbath' is an expression of the degree or condition of spiritual receptivity, sensitivity, inclination, predisposition, openness, respect, love, and trust that a seeker has for that which is being transmitted by Divinity through the locus of manifestation known as a 'spiritual guide'.

'Nisbath' is a process that is not fixed. It can expand and develop, or it can become constricted and wither.

'Nisbath' is best served when the seeker sincerely wants for herself or himself what the shaykh sincerely wants for the seeker. The himma or spiritual aspiration of the shaykh with respect to the seeker is an expression of the shaykh's own condition of 'nisbath' with respect to Divinity.

As such, the teacher wants for himself or herself what Divinity wants for the teacher, and in the case of the shaykh's relationship with the seeker, what Divinity wishes is for the Divine aspiration or Himma concerning the Hidden Treasure to be realized in the seeker through the himma or focus of spiritual aspiration of the shaykh concerning that seeker.

When the 'nisbath' of the seeker for the shaykh [and, through the shaykh, for the silsilah, and through the silsilah, for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and through the Prophet, for Allah] is developing and expanding, the catalytic impact of the shaykh's himma on the spiritual condition of the seeker can be, if God wishes, substantial. When the 'nisbath' of the seeker is constricted and withered, then, the catalytic impact of the shaykh's himma on the spiritual condition of the seeker is much more limited, constrained, hidden, and/or veiled.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "Like Sufi faith, Sufi practice is rooted in the Shahadah. Hence it combines two complementary perspectives - negation and affirmation, or 'no god' and 'but

God'. The 'god' or false reality that needs to be negated is the individual self or ego, the face turned toward the west and oblivious of the east. As long as self-awareness is dominated by the ego, people will not be able to see the sun's light. Instead, they will perceive a multitude of shadows, false realities, and 'idols'. In Rumi's words, "The mother of all idols is your own ego."

Contrary to what the author maintains in the foregoing -- and as has been touched upon in a previous commentary -- the Shahadah does not consist in "two complementary perspectives -- negation and affirmation". What appears to involve an initial negation within the Shahadah is, in fact, only affirmation.

One cannot understand the truth of the first aspect of the Shahadah -- namely, 'there is no reality' or 'there is no god/divinity' -- until one comes to understand something of the 'reality' of God or Divinity. When one understands this latter point -- which is the fulcrum around which the Shahadah pivots, then, one understands that the first part of the Shahadah is an affirmation not a negation -- it is an expression of the affirmative truth that 'there is no 'god' or 'reality' or 'divinity' (small 'g', 'r', and 'd' respectively), but one can only understand the significance of this affirmation after one, by the Grace of God, has been given insight, on some level-- even if only rudimentary -- into the reality of the comprehensiveness of Divinity's Presence.

In reality, one cannot begin to appreciate the truth inherent in 'there is no reality' or 'there is no god' until Reality begins to act on the individual. While the author's reference to the saying of Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) -- (i.e., 'the ego is the mother of all idols') -- is important, one must place the insight of Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) in a proper context. One cannot begin to negate anything -- especially the ego, on one's own.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said "The movements of the nafs [note: this is a more comprehensive term than 'ego' and, in addition, Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) is unlikely to have used the term 'ego', but this word probably entered by way of translation] are more difficult to detect than the movements of a black ant on a smooth rock on a dark night". Many people assume the goal of the spiritual path is easily accessible because they fail to take into account just how pervasive, subtle and devious are the movements of the unredeemed nafs.

In truth, the nafs or ego should first recuse itself in the matter of spirituality, for it is caught up in a conflict of interest in which not only will the unredeemed-nafs refuse to serve the interests of spirituality, but the unredeemed-nafs will actively seek to undermine all efforts that might be directed toward spirituality. If understood properly, the attestation of the Shahadah is the individual's initial recognition -- however dimly understood -- that the words which are being voiced are an act of recusal that acknowledges the need to defer to the judgment of an independent spiritual counsel -- i.e., Divinity.

The author has the cart before the horse, so to speak, when he maintains that the Shahadah involves, first, negation, and, then, affirmation. Affirmation must precede recusal.

In other words, there needs to be something that motivates an openness to the process of recusal. This motivation is rooted in the individual's preparedness--as indicated by the voicing of the Shahadah --to acquiesce or submit to the one and only Divinity or Reality as That which takes precedence in all matters.

When one understands, to some extent, what one accepts, then, one is in a position to entertain this or that consideration for negation. Consequently, when one understands that Reality, Truth, and Being all take 'their' direction from Divinity -- or, more accurately, are, in a sense, expressions of Divinity (or, better yet, what Divinity makes possible) -- then one has a point of reference from which to examine and analyze life experiences for purposes of sorting out those experiences that might be resonant with affirmation of Divinity and those experiences that might not be consonant with affirmation of Divinity.

According to the author: "As long as self-awareness is dominated by the ego, people will not be able to see the sun's light. Instead, they will perceive a multitude of shadows, false realities, and 'idols' ". This way of stating things is not quite correct.

The problem is not just when 'self-awareness is dominated by the ego'. The problem is 'self-awareness', as distinguished from Self- awareness.

There is a story that is told about Hazrat Ra'bia of Basra (may Allah be pleased with her) and a Sufi acquaintance in which the two are described as being on a hillside looking down on village or town. The Sufi acquaintance is reported to have turned to Hazrat Ra'bia (may Allah be pleased with her)

and said, while motioning to the inhabitants of the village below: 'Look at those people, they don't say their prayers, and they don't fast, or go on Hajj'. Then, the Sufi is reported to have continued on with words that described how he had not ever missed any prayers, or any fasts, and had gone on pilgrimage many times. This individual was about to go on when Hazrat Ra'bia (may Allah be pleased with her) gave him a stern look and said: "Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare."

Here was a Sufi whose self-awareness was not necessarily dominated by his ego, but whose capacity for understanding was dominated by his 'self-awareness'. The ego or nafs cannot be redeemed until there is some degree of understanding concerning the existence of a dimension of Being that is more 'real' than 'self-awareness'.

At the very core of an individual's being is the 'Self'. One's awareness of oneself as a small-'s' self, as something separate and apart from the Hidden Treasure, gets in the way of recognizing the truth about one's true, innermost nature.

Nafs is a major player in maintaining darkness or 'kufr' (unbelief/hiding) concerning the nature of one's true inner reality, but nafs is aided and abetted by our individual capacity for choosing. This capacity for choice or intentionality is completely separate from nafs, but nafs -- along with Satanic influences, dunya or the world, and human unbelievers -- all are busily lobbying this capacity for choice or intentionality in order to capture its 'vote' and, thereby, proceed in a direction that is in opposition to, or rebellion against, Truth and Reality.

All of us have the capacity to make a choice between 'self' and 'Self ... between self-awareness and Self-awareness. When we choose self-awareness, then, 'ego' or nafs amaara is in a position to dominate self-awareness, but when we choose, by the Grace of God, that which is consonant with Self-awareness, then, we become open to spiritual forces that are capable of resisting and struggling against the activities of nafs, Satanic influences, dunya, or unbelievers.

People who are dominated by 's'-elf-awareness "perceive a multitude of shadows, false realities, and 'idols'" because this sort of awareness blinds them to the 'reality' of things. "It is not their eyes, but the hearts within their breasts, which are blind." (22:46)

The heart's blindness to the Presence of the Self leaves the realms of awareness and choice to be co-opted by, among other forces, nafs amaara. If 's'-elf-awareness could be replaced by Self-awareness, then, 'shadows, false realities and idols' would be seen for what they are.

Perception is in the eye of the beholder. And, there is a huge difference between the 'self' as beholder and the 'Self' as Beholder.

An individual sees what she or he sees because the individual makes choices that reach out for the 'self' or the 'Self. Once such choices have been made, the nature of the choices are such that either the unredeemed-nafs is permitted to enter the picture, thereby, taking advantage of the confusion created by poor spiritual choices, or the individual is opened up to spiritual forces (due to the nature of the underlying choices) that are capable, God willing, of leading toward the transformation of the nafs from being a rebel to being a spiritual ally.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "The actual path of Sufism entails a process of inner transformation whereby the powers of the soul are turned toward God. Sufism adds to the strictly Shariite practices many devotional and spiritual exercises. The most important of these, around which the others are ranged as so many auxiliary means, is the 'remembrance' (dhikr) of God, which the Koran commands people to perform in many verses. Remembrance was taught by the Prophet to his close companions in the specific forms that make up the kernel of the Sufi discipline."

Once again, the author's words give the impression that the heart of the Sufi path is a matter of practices or exercises that, if diligently pursued, will lead to a certain spiritual result. In truth, however, very little, if any, spiritual progress can be made on the Sufi path independently of a dynamic, living relationship -- established through nisbath, initiation and himma -- between an authentic shaykh and a sincere seeker that is pursued within a context of the loving and protective embrace of a chain of spiritual transmission (i.e., silsilah) that links back to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and, ultimately, to Allah -- "No soul can believe except by the Will of Allah, and He will place doubt (or obscurity) on those who will not understand." (10:100)

An individual might read of certain spiritual exercises in a book on the Sufi path, or an individual might somehow learn, through friends or relatives, about Sufi practices, but if such a person begins to practice these

exercises on his or her own, without an authentic guide to accompany the individual, then, the direction in which this sort of independently-minded person might be taken is not necessarily toward Divinity. There are many reasons for this.

Generally speaking, the fall of Iblis -- from: an elevated spiritual station of being allowed to associate with, as well as teach, the angels, to: the lowest of the low -- is thought by many people to be because of pride. Iblis believed he was better than the one [Adam (peace be upon him)] into whom Divinity was blowing something of His spirit, and, supposedly, because of this sense of pride, Iblis permitted it to interfere with his obeying God's Commandment to fall prostrate before the one into whom the Breath of the spirit of Divinity had been blown.

Notwithstanding the enormous pride that Satan had in being of the jinn (i.e., those who were made of 'smokeless fire'), this pride was embedded in an even greater ignorance about the nature of the original Divine Himma that brought forth Creation in order that the 'Hidden Treasure' should be known. Despite more than 500,000 years of spiritual devotion, despite a deep and intense love for Divinity, and despite possessing a knowledge that enabled him to teach the angels, in the end, it was Satan's ignorance that did him in, not his pride -- 'pride' was merely the excuse he used while entangled in a much more fundamental problem of ignorance concerning the purpose of Creation.

If not for this ignorance, pride might never have been permitted to be given full expression, for it was this ignorance that prevented Satan from taking the spiritual steps necessary to check his pride. The sin was not in the existence of pride, per se, but in the presence of a 'self-awareness that would not permit itself to see the deeper 'Self' that does understand the purpose of Creation.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said there is nothing wrong in feeling anger. However, he added that once an individual feels anger swelling up within, then, the individual must swallow the anger.

God has placed within both human beings and jinn an inclination toward a negative and potentially destructive emotion like pride. When this kind of emotion is stirred up through one's entanglement in the events of life, this 'stirring' is an expression of our respective, created natures, and, as such, the feeling of, in this case, pride is quite natural.

This is part of the 'package' that humans and jinn have been bequeathed through Creation. Consequently, there is nothing wrong when pride is induced into making its presence felt.

The problem comes when the individual-- be it man or jinn -- fails to 'swallow' the pride that is felt and, as a result, allows the latter's presence not only to be felt, but to be manifested through action, as well. Because Satan was not as spiritually knowledgeable about the purpose of Creation as he supposed himself to be, his ignorance prevented him from taking the steps necessary to curb his pride.

Like the angels, Satan had limited insight into the nature of humankind. The angels were bewildered by why Divinity was creating a form of being that would spread bloodshed and corruption in the land, and Satan was bewildered by why he was being commanded to fall prostrate before one whom he deemed to be inherently inferior to the jinn.

In each case, Divinity knew that which neither the angels nor Satan knew or understood. Nevertheless, the ignorance of the angels was not fatal and, despite their bewilderment, they bowed in prostration, when commanded to do so, before the being into whom the Breath of God's spirit had been blown. Unfortunately for Satan, his ignorance was fatal, and he lost his elevated spiritual station and much more due to his failure to curb his pride in time to bow in prostration as commanded by Divinity.

On the one hand, ignorance, like pride, is something to which jinn and mankind are vulnerable. On the other hand, the presence of ignorance can be much, much harder to detect than the presence of a feeling of pride.

Iblis might have sensed the presence of pride within him, but his ignorance concerning the purpose of Creation that also was present within him was much more oblique and, perhaps, consequently, went undetected. Instead of saying to himself: 'wait a minute, there is something here I do not understand', and, then, using his awareness of the presence of such ignorance to restrain his pride, he, at best, glossed over such ignorance, and, at worst, never saw its presence at all, and, as a result, allowed the pride to go on unchecked. Pride might have been the attendant cause of Satan's fall, but the underlying cause was ignorance concerning the purpose of Creation.

The foregoing situation involving Iblis is directly applicable to the lives of those who would become occupied with various 'Sufi' exercises but who

would do so independently of a qualified spiritual guide and the concomitant lineage of spiritual transmission. Like Iblis, such a person is in the throes of ignorance, and like Iblis, such a person likely will never see what 'hits' him when his spiritual potential is corrupted by acts that are done out of ignorance.

Iblis lost his opportunity for realizing, and maintaining, his full spiritual potential because -- due to ignorance and pride -- he failed to follow the indicated Path. The Path to realizing spiritual potential requires an individual to spend time learning from one who knows more than the seeker does about the purpose of life and who has been authorized to serve as a locus of manifestation for the transmission of the knowledge, protection, support, and other forms of barakah that enables the individual to, God willing, struggle and realize 'fitra' or spiritual potential.

Iblis thought he knew the purpose of life, but he didn't. Iblis thought he knew his role in the scheme of things, but he didn't. Iblis thought he knew how to return Home to his spiritual origins, but he didn't. Iblis thought he could do things on his own, but he couldn't. Iblis was shown a way out of his ignorance, but he refused it.

Iblis exhibited 'kufr' -- that is, unbelief or the hiding of truth -- both with respect to his own essential Self, as well as in relation to the spiritual Path designated by God-- namely, to respect, learn from, and keep company with -- the one into whom something of God's spirit had been breathed. Iblis also committed shirk -- that is, bowing to something other than what Divinity wishes one to bow to -- when he set himself up as independent authority whose 'judgment' should be preferred to the Command of Divinity.

Iblis is a paradigmatic example of what not to do if one is seeking Truth. He followed his own path and became hopelessly lost.

Anyone who decides that he or she can blaze his or her own path to the Truth, or to the realization of essential identity and spiritual capacity, is following the path of Iblis. And, unless the Mercy of God intervenes in the life of such a person, then, this individual too, like Iblis, will become hopelessly lost with respect to finding one's way to, and realizing, the purpose of life. This is why Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) indicated that 'any individual who seeks to pursue the Sufi path without a shaykh has Iblis for a guide.'

According to the author, “The actual path of Sufism entails a process of inner transformation whereby the powers of the soul are turned toward God.” The author doesn’t specify what ‘powers of the soul’ he is talking about, but unless he is talking about the various faculties within the human spiritual potential that have the capacity to engage the Hidden Treasure through different modalities of knowing, then, he is quite wrong about what ‘the actual path of Sufism entails’.

The ‘inner transformation’ that takes place on the Sufi path is entirely directed toward calibrating , activating, and maximizing (according to capacity) the spiritual instrumentality we possess in the form of mind, soul, heart, sirr, spirit, kafi, and aqfah, so that we might worship Divinity (i.e., know -- with love, gratitude, and adab -- the ‘Hidden Treasure’ that is manifested to, and through, our ‘fitra’ both individually and collectively). During the journey along the Sufi path, these ‘powers’ of the soul are, God willing, being properly oriented, aligned and realized by virtue of the transformational impact of the barakah being transmitted through the himma of the spiritual guide and the silsilah, on the entire spiritual potential of ‘fitra’ -- of which the redeemed-nafs is but one dimension.

The author continues on with his brief overview of what he considers to be the nature of the Sufi path by saying: “Sufism adds to the strictly Shariite practices many devotional and spiritual exercises.” In truth, and contrary to what the author maintains above, the Sufi path adds nothing to the Shariite practices. Instead, the Sufi path seeks to help people to become aware of the tremendous depth, breadth, and richness of Shari ‘ah, and, just as importantly, the Sufi path seeks to assist people to understand the essential purpose of Shari ‘ah.

Shari ‘ah gives expression to the Divine Law, but ‘Law’ is not just about legalisms concerning a list of do’s and don’ts. For instance, only a relatively small portion of the Qur’an is devoted to the sort of prescriptions and proscriptions in which most of the jurists are interested

Divine Law encompasses all facets of the Himma that gives expression to the bringing forth of Created being in relation to knowing the ‘Hidden Treasure’. Some parts of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ are to be known through ritual prayers, fasting, zaqat, pilgrimage, and so on, while other aspects of the ‘Hidden Treasure’ are to be known through other means.

Just as there are laws of physics, chemistry, biology, cosmology, and mathematics that describe the nature of the physical universe, there are laws of spirituality that not only describe, but which give expression to, the nature of every level, realm, domain, and world of Creation.

If our understanding were sufficiently deep, we would understand that the physical laws are entirely subsumable under one, or another, category of spiritual law. Similarly, the framework of do's and don'ts, halal and haram, permitted and impermissible that establish the parameters within which certain dimensions of communal and individual behavior are to be conducted, also is subsumable under one, or another category of the Divine Law that encompasses all realms of Creation.

Just as one would be short-changing the Divine Law if one were to become solely preoccupied with only the facets of Divine Law that were manifested through physical laws, so too one would be short-changing the Divine Law if one were to become solely preoccupied with only those facets of Divine Law that were given expression through the legal framework circumscribing certain aspects of social and individual behavior. Divine Law embraces both the physical law and the social/legal framework, and much, much, much more.

All of the practices and spiritual exercises of the Sufi path have their origins in either the Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). And, since the Qur'an and the Sunnah are both directed toward drawing our attention to the nature of Divine Law, considered in its most comprehensive sense, then, obviously, none of these practices or spiritual exercises is being added to Shari'ah -- rather, these practices and exercises are, each in its own way, introducing the practitioner, God willing, to different dimensions of Shari'ah.

The essence of Shari'ah, construed in its broadest sense, is to be found in the Divine Himma out of which Creation arose. In other words, the essence of Shari'ah is contained within the purpose of Creation, and the purpose of the Sufi path is to support and direct the struggles of individuals to become open, or receptive to, 'unveilings' concerning the essence of Shari'ah.

Unveilings in relation to the identity of Self and the nature of 'fitra' are crucial facets of Divine Law or Shari'ah on which the Sufi path is focused. This is because only when essential spiritual identity and capacity are realized, can one worship in a manner that resonates fully with the purpose

underlying Divine Shari 'ah -- a Shari 'ah that, when fully understood (at least to the extent of one's spiritual capacity to do so), gives expression to the ways in which the 'Hidden Treasure' can be known through Creation.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* indicates that the primary practice or exercise of the Sufi path, and "around which the others are ranged as so many auxiliary means, is the 'remembrance' (dhikr) of God, which the Koran commands people to perform in many verses. Remembrance was taught by the Prophet to his close companions in the specific forms that make up the kernel of the Sufi discipline."

Aside from the fact that the Qur'an doesn't actually 'command' people to do dhikr (zikr) so much as it: encourages, reminds, suggests, recommends, instructs, confirms, entreats, as well as warns, concerning the importance of dhikr, one also wonders how anything -- such as dhikr -- which is mentioned so frequently, and with such emphasis in the Qur'an -- can be considered to fall outside the framework of Divine Law, as the phrase "strictly Shariite practices" tends to suggest. Surely, any concept of Shariite practices that does not make room for the entire message of the Qur'an concerning the nature of Divine Law in its most comprehensive sense is seriously deficient -- a point with which the author might agree.

In any event, "the kernel of the Sufi discipline" is not the "specific forms" of dhikr that the Prophet taught to his close companions. As important as these forms of dhikr might be, the kernel of the Sufi discipline is, and always has been, the relationship that one has with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) directly, or through one's shaykh, the silsilah, and one's own 'fitra' (and the latter three 'avenues' are actually the same as the first except they give expression to different loci of manifestation for the same transmission of barakah).

Most of the Qur'an's references to dhikr are non-specific -- e.g., "Remember Me and I will remember you," (2:147), or, "Remember God often so that you might prosper." (8:46). In other words, the activity of dhikr is being endorsed rather than specific forms of dhikr.

Generally speaking, the details concerning what dhikrs to say, or when, or under what circumstances, or how, or in what manner, or the number of times, or what the spiritual meaning is, if any, of experiences arising out of invocation -- all of these details are to unfold within the context of a relationship between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- or those whom he authorizes to supervise this sort of instruction -- and the

individual seeker. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The best zikr is -- la ilaha illa'llah, and the best prayer of supplication is: -- alhamdu li'llah."

The dhikr that is taught through the Prophet is efficacious because this is the doorway through which God wished that the house of dhikr should be entered -- and, surely, this is entailed by the second part of the Shahadah that stipulates that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah (or God or Divinity or Reality or the Truth). In other words, dhikr taught through the Prophet, or with his permission, is efficacious because this is a doorway that is immersed in God's blessings, and it is the presence of Divine barakah that causes a dhikr to be effective and not the recitation of that dhikr, in and of itself-- as the Qur'an indicates: "Nor does he (Muhammad) speak of his own accord." (53:3).

Dhikr that is entered into through unauthorized doors has limited, if any value -- in fact, the effect of saying unauthorized dhikrs might even be harmful ... depending on the nature of the dhikr being invoked. One should never consider a dhikr independently of the context through which it is being introduced, for a dhikr will be colored, shaped, oriented, and otherwise influenced, by the spiritual character of that context.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* says that: "The 'normal' human situation is one of forgetfulness and heedlessness." Actually, the inclination to 'forgetfulness and heedlessness' is more like a function of the human counterpart to the 'default' concept in computer programs rather than being the 'normal' situation for human beings.

A default setting is the one that will govern a program unless steps are taken to re-configure various settings in some alternative manner that is permitted by the program. One always has the choice of whether to go with a default setting or a re-configured one, but a choice does have to be made.

The nature of nafs amaara has been designed, in part, to resist, and act in opposition to, spirituality. When we choose to let nafs amaara go through life according to its unredeemed nature, then, we have opted for its default settings of anger, pride, jealousy, envy, hatred, selfishness, lust, greed, and so on.

In turn, letting these default settings operate unopposed, leads to 'forgetfulness and heedlessness'. In time, we might even forget that we have any choice in the matter.

The author continues on with his discussion of dhikr by stating that: "The least precondition for human perfection is to recognize one's own imperfection and to remember the perfection of the one Reality. But in order to remember the Real in Its fullness, seekers must forget the unreal...."

While the recognition of one's 'imperfection' might be an important aid to developing a healthy sense of humility, if the goal of the human being is not necessarily perfection -- whatever this might mean -- then, approaching dhikr with one's own imperfection as well as with the fact of Divine perfection in mind, might not be the most fruitful way to engage dhikr.

All dhikr should be approached with the realization that whatever the purpose of a particular dhikr might be, "God is the rich, and we are the poor" (35:15). Irrespective of what we do, we always are in a state of need and dependence with respect to Divinity.

Invoking one or another Name of God is a call for help. The call goes from one who is in need to One Who is without need but Who is fully capable of answering the call of the invoker.

Different invocations involve different Names of Divinity because the need which leads to that invocation requires a specific kind of remedy -- spiritual or otherwise. Each invocation has a focus concerning some dimension of Divinity that is unique to that invocation.

The focus of a given invocation is not generally, if ever, about imperfection and perfection. The focus of an invocation is on the meaning of the Divine Name being invoked.

Instead of considerations revolving about an 'imperfection/perfection' axis, an invocation is more likely to be engaged through the following sort of attitude -- namely, I need help and support in certain areas, and the invocation that has been assigned to me by my shaykh is one that has been selected, through Your blessings and authority, as being appropriate to my current needs. Please respond to my call.

If one is focused on the meaning of the Name that is being expressed through a given dhikr, there is no need to forget the 'unreal', since "The Real has come and falsehood has vanished, and falsehood is ever bound to vanish." (17:81) The Real is present in the focus surrounding, and being

expressed through, the dhikr -- a focus that is supported through the spiritual himma of the shaykh that is, itself, a reflection of the Divine Himma.

As God has promised in the Qur'an: 'remember Me, and I will remember you'. Through God's remembering of the invoker, the needs of the invoker are met. As such, invocation is one of the ways established by Divinity for occasioning His doing the dhikr of a particular person within the Divine Name that responds to the need of that individual.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* brings his preliminary discussion of dhikr to a close by stating that: "In the Koran and in Islamic usage in general, the command to 'remember' God also means to 'mention' God, so the actual means of remembering God is the mention of God's name (or names). The name is considered to be the direct manifestation of the divine on the human level. Through a gradual process or transformation, the name fills up the mind and consciousness, leaving no room for remembrance of others. The basic insight here is that awareness is the fundamental reality of human nature, and its content determines who we are."

As pointed out earlier, references to dhikr that occur at different junctures of the Qur'an are not commands. They are a call for people to participate in that which will be of benefit to them.

Furthermore, depending on what the author means by the term "mentioning", his contention that 'remembrance' is a matter of mentioning God's Name might, or might not, be correct. For instance, some forms of dhikr are said audibly, and some forms of remembrance are silent.

The latter form of dhikr need not involve any 'mentioning'. In other words, silent dhikr is not necessarily just audible dhikr that becomes internalized vocalization -- although, for some, this might be the case.

In fact, the 'king of dhikrs' is when an individual does not do any mentioning at all -- either audibly or silently. In such cases, the individual is witness to a Divine dhikr that is being said through the individual rather than by the individual, and under these sort of circumstances, the individual can neither initiate the dhikr, nor stop it once it starts.

However, aside from the foregoing 'king of dhikrs', any intention that gives expression to a sincere desire to serve Divinity is a form of

remembrance. Sometimes this remembrance is translated into the specific mentioning of one of the Names of God, and sometimes this remembrance is translated into other acts of worship involving, for example, kindness, generosity, hospitality, compassion, and so on.

Remembrance is really a state of being -- of attitude, orientation, inclination, receptivity, intention, direction, understanding, mind, heart, and identity. Remembrance is inherent in the quality of awareness that permeates all of these modalities of remembrance.

If one is preoccupied with Divinity, then, one looks for, and finds, signs of God's presence everywhere -- without and within. Every facet of life becomes a way of remembering the One Who underwrites all that we are, experience, and encounter--just as the contents of a loved one's house reminds us of the loved one.

Dhikr is one of the ways through which one might be brought into a constant state of remembrance. Nevertheless, this latter state is not so much a matter of the individual's constant mentioning --in the sense of verbalizing -- one, or another, Name of Divinity, as much as it is a state, condition, or station in which everything one encounters gives expression to, and serves as a locus of manifestation for, Divinity.

However, this condition is called 'remembrance' because it is based on experiential encounters with Divine manifestations that are passing away even as they occur. Since we can never circumscribe or exhaust Divinity, we are always behind in our experiencing of the constant waves of Divine manifestation that pass through us.

God's capacity for generating manifestation outstrips our capacity to experience those manifestations. Everywhere we look, there is the Face of God, but what we see is a Face that is constantly changing its modality of manifestation.

We remember the manifestation. In remembering the manifestation, we remember Divinity. We remember Divinity Who is constantly in the 'now' by means of manifestations that are constantly passing away from the moment.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "The name is considered to be the direct manifestation of the divine on the human level", but this is a misleading way of stating things. Irrespective of whether Divine

Names are mentioned or manifested, the Divine is Present -- in fact, it could not be otherwise.

The 'human level', along with all other levels of the Created Universe, gives expression to the Divine Himma inherent in "I loved to be known". "Where ever one turns, there is Allah's purpose. (2:115)"

When Divinity -- Who is always in the here and now -- chooses to disclose a certain dimension of Divinity, this dimension is given expression through a specific locus of manifestation. Such loci are referred to by one, or another, Name of God because the nature of that which is being manifested reflects, or gives expression to, something from the domain that God has assigned to that Name.

Yet, irrespective of whatever Name might be used the One responsible for the disclosure remains the same. A given Name is the particular doorway, or locus of manifestation, or means, through which 'That which is beyond Names' chooses to disclose something of Its Presence to serve the purpose of the Divine Himma with respect to the 'Hidden Treasure', Creation, and knowing.

Thus, a Name is not, as the author supposes: "the direct manifestation of the divine on the human level" since the Divine is never removed from the human level, or any other level of Creation. No level of Creation could continue to exist if the Divine were not continuously present, for all levels of Creation are nothing but manifestations of the Divine Presence.

The Names are manifested disclosures of the Divine Presence to other realms of manifest disclosure of the Divine Presence. Divinity is present in the Names, and Divinity is present in the other realms, and both are expressions of the 'Hidden Treasure' that is being known through these respective realms of disclosure.



## 28 - Interior Life

Page 18 - Chapter Two: "In a broad sense, Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice."

Commentary: The foregoing description is so broad that its characterization is rendered largely useless as a way of helping anyone to understand the nature of the Sufi path. Every niyat or intention to pursue faith and practice -- irrespective of whether this comes from a Sufi or a non-Sufi -- requires some degree of interiorization in order to be considered minimally acceptable as an expression of sincerity or commitment, or worship ... otherwise it would be just vacuous activity.

Furthermore, many Muslims who have no interest in the Sufi path, or who even might be hostile to this dimension of Islam (if they consider it to be Islamic at all), are very much concerned with continuing to work toward enhancing both the interior quality and intensity of their faith and practice throughout their lives. As a result, one is confronted with a practical problem of having to try to establish some set of criteria that would enable one to develop a conceptual line of demarcation that differentiates the Sufi sort of "interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice" from the non-Sufi variety.

God alone knows the degree of focus, attentiveness, awareness, and commitment that is contained with any given instance of faith or practice. No Sufi who hopes to remain on the path would permit himself or herself to entertain the idea that her or his form of faith and practice is, somehow, more interiorized or intensified than, say, the 'average' Muslim -- for, in such thoughts are the seeds of spiritual ruination.

On the Sufi path, one is permitted to compare oneself to others if the object of the comparison is to note how others are superior to one in this or that aspect of faith, sincerity, taqwa, worship, knowledge and so on. This sort of exercise is good for the soul for it identifies areas on which one can work and try, God willing, to do better.

However, if the object of the comparison is to try to indicate some way in which one is superior to others, then, this is a sure sign of the presence of nafs. No authentic Sufi shaykh would encourage seekers, or others, to think along such lines.

If one is preoccupied with issues of humility, sincerity, nobility, selflessness, integrity, generosity, repentance, and the like, then, the kind

of description or characterization that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is putting forth in the foregoing quote, never arises as being either accurate or even relevant. Of course, the author might argue that his description of the Sufi path is just a thumbnail sketch sort of effort and not intended as anything more than this, but if Sufi shaykhs do not tend to think in that way about the Sufi path, then, one has to question the value of the author's doing so.

## 29 - Etymology

Page 18 - Chapter Two: “The derivation of the word [i.e., “Sufi”] has often been debated. Modern scholars have concluded that the most likely original meaning was “one who wears wool.” It is said that by the eighth century (the second century of Islam) the term was sometimes applied to people whose ascetic inclinations led them to wear coarse and uncomfortable woolen garments. Gradually it came to designate a group who differentiated themselves from other Muslims by stressing certain specific teachings and practices of the Koran and the Prophet.”

Commentary: Whatever modern scholars might have concluded about “the most likely original meaning” of the word “sufi”, al -Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him), among others, already had reached the same conclusion concerning the etymological derivation of the term nearly a thousand years before those scholars were even born. Moreover, given that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* spent some time in the early part of his book talking about the importance of going back to primary sources, one is somewhat mystified why the author would cite the work of modern scholars on this issue rather than original sources -- especially in view of the likelihood that many of the current scholars to whom he alludes have based their conclusions, in part, on the arguments of al-Hujwiri (may Allah be pleased with him) in *Kashfal-Mahjub*.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* goes on to mention that “by the eighth century (the second century of Islam) the term was sometimes applied to people whose ascetic inclinations led them to wear coarse and uncomfortable woolen garments.” Aside from the fact that the author does not identify who the individuals were that “sometimes” applied this term to certain people, nor does he identify whether the ascetics to whom the term was applied actually were practitioners of the mystical dimension of Islam, rather than people who might have been engaged in some other kind of mystical or spiritual practice, one might take exception with the author’s equating of the eighth century with “the second century of Islam”.

While the eighth century does include (after 733 A.D.) much of the second century following the passing away of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), in truth, Islam made its first appearance in history with the Prophet Adam (peace be upon him), thousands of years prior to the eighth century, and, therefore, the second century of Islam occurred many, many centuries before the time cited by the author. This might seem like a

rather minor issue, but, in fact, is quite paradigmatic of the problems that permeate the author's book.

On the one hand, the author claims he wishes to allow the Sufi tradition to speak for itself without his getting in the way. Unfortunately, at virtually every turn in the book in question, one is stumbling over the author's ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions and judgments.

The author's parenthetical equating of the eighth century with the second century of Islam is a case in point. His equating of the two eras suggests, rather strongly, that he believes Islam started with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This is not so, and this is not what the Qur'an teaches, nor is it what the Prophet taught, nor is this what Sufi shaykhs maintain.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last in a line of some 124,000 prophets dating back to the days of Adam (peace be upon him), the first Prophet. All of the individuals in this spiritual lineage were Prophets of Islam.

Finally, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* claims that the term "sufi" gradually came to designate a group who differentiated themselves from other Muslims by stressing certain specific teachings and practices of the Koran and the Prophet." This would have been a timely occasion for the author to identify, at least in outline form, what these "certain specific teachings and practices of the Koran and the Prophet" are which differentiate people of the path from other Muslims, but, the opportunity was allowed to pass by.

Of course, the author might believe the previous 20 pages, or so, of his book already have taken care of such a preliminary outline, or he might believe the description, noted at the beginning of the previous commentary, accomplishes precisely this sort of thing. However, the content contained, to this point, within the first 29 commentaries on his work, all have indicated that if the author does believe he already has identified the "specific teachings and practices of the Koran and the Prophet" that permit one to distinguish Sufi from other Muslims, then, the author's belief concerning this issue is not well-founded.

### 30 - Divine Guidance

Page 19 - Chapter Two: “In general, the Sufis have looked upon themselves as those Muslims who take seriously God’s call to perceive His presence both in the world and in the self. They stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. On the theological level, Sufis speak of God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than they discuss His wrath, severity, and majesty.”

Commentary: Many Muslims, and not just those who have set foot on the Sufi path, “take seriously God’s call to perceive His presence both in the world and the self.” Earlier in his book, the author, himself, cited the “Hadith of Gabriel” in which the condition of ‘ihsan’ is given prominence.

In that Hadith, the Prophet characterized ‘ihsan’ as a function of worshiping God as if one saw Him but that even if one could not achieve such awareness, nevertheless, the individual should know that God sees her or him. The Prophet, subsequently, told the Companions with him that Gabriel (Peace be on him) had come that day to teach them their Deen.

Deen is not just for those who are inclined to the Sufi path. Since everyone comes into being with a primordial spiritual potential that might be activated and realized, Deen is there for everyone.

People engage Deen according to their capacity, condition, and circumstances in conjunction with guidance. In fact, one of the differences between Sufis and Muslims not on the Sufi path revolves about this issue of guidance, including the quality and depth of that guidance.

The authentic Sufi teacher, shaykh, or guide is a living manifestation of Divine guidance. That is, Divinity works through the locus of manifestation known as a guide or shaykh in order to assist initiates or people of the path to work toward realizing their primordial spiritual nature or ‘fitra’.

For those who are skeptical of the foregoing contention, then, they might reflect on the revealed account of Moses (peace be upon him) and the burning bush (28:30) on Mount Sinai. As this account -- which exists in both the Old Testament and the Qur’an -- clearly indicates, God can speak, and give guidance, through whatever vehicle Divinity chooses to do so.

Just as God honored one particular bush with the task of serving as a locus of manifestation for Divine guidance, so, too, some individuals

are honored by God to serve as loci of manifestation of Divine Guidance. Indeed, humankind that, as the Qur'an indicates, was created with the highest of spiritual potential, is better endowed than a bush to serve in such a capacity -- although, unfortunately, the bush in question attained a spiritual status, however fleeting, that is higher than a lot of people will ever know or even suspect is possible.

The Sufi shaykh is one through whom the 'kernels' of spiritual knowledge, that are spoken of in the Qur'an (39:9), are brought to light and constructively applied to a seeker's life situation so that the latter can realize, God willing, her or his essential spiritual identity and unique spiritual capacity. The Sufi shaykh is the field of taqwa that God promised in the Qur'an to cultivate, develop and bring to fruition with an understanding that none but Allah possesses -- so Allah is the only One Who can teach and dispense such knowledge, and the Sufi shaykh is the one charged with the responsibility of, among other things, working with people to help make, God willing, the application of this knowledge and understanding accessible to seekers in a practical, heuristic form.

Who is the real Guide of the Sufi path? God, of course, but as Allah points out in the Qur'an, He does not speak to people except through revelation or a veil, and authentic Sufi shaykhs are exemplars of the latter -- that is, special veils through whom guidance is transmitted to those who are receptive to what is being offered ... taqwa speaking to taqwa by Divine permission.

Contrary to what the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* attempts to suggest in the quote that gives rise to the present commentary, the difference between Muslims on the Sufi path and Muslims who are not on that path is not that the former take seriously God's call to realizing the Divine Presence around and within them, whereas the latter do not take this call seriously. Rather, a fundamental difference between the two is that those on the Sufi path have availed themselves of the Divine guidance that God has made available through the locus of manifestation known as a shaykh, whereas Muslims who are not on the Sufi path have ignored or failed to take advantage of this opportunity.

Whether these latter individuals understand it or not, they are committing the same mistake as did Iblis when he failed to acknowledge the system that Divinity has set in place for the realization of spiritual potential. More specifically, Iblis rejected the idea that the 'Way'

to his essential nature could only be found through the one whom God had authorized to serve this purpose.

Iblis was not being asked to bow down to man, per se. He was being asked to acquiesce to the way in which Deen operated -- that is, Divine guidance, or the spirit that was blown into the 'authorized one', is transmitted through a locus of manifestation that is selected for the purpose of helping individuals work toward realization of essential identity and unique, spiritual capacity in the light of such guidance.

The irony of the foregoing is that Iblis was quite in synch with the nature of this Deen when he was the one authorized by God to serve as a locus of manifestation for the transmission of Divine guidance to the angels and jinn. When the situation changed, and God said to Iblis that you are in need of the spiritual help of My authorized agent, Iblis balked, and the 'way of Deen' was no longer attractive to him.

As pointed out in a previous commentary, Iblis' essential err or was not pride but ignorance. Among other things, he really didn't understand the nature of Deen.

He didn't understand that Divine guidance is transmitted through selected loci of manifestation or veils, and, as a result, he considered the spiritual understanding that he dispensed to the angels and jinn was his knowledge and understanding --when, in truth, it belonged to God, came from God, and was merely being transmitted through Iblis. He didn't understand that there were dimensions of his own spiritual potential that only could be unlocked through those special veils that were Divinely authorized to assist Iblis in a way somewhat similar to the way in which God had taught angels and jinn through Iblis prior to the latter's fall from Grace.

All sin is committed in a state of forgetfulness. When we forget who we are, when we forget Who Allah is, when we forget what our relationship with Allah is, when we forget the nature of the 'way of Deen' through which God guides us, then, we are vulnerable to having our lives darkened by the currents of ignorance that lead us into the commission of acts that are transgressions against our own souls.

The sin of pride was committed by Iblis. But, first, he forgot, and it was this forgetting that was the beginning of the end for him - "They forgot God, and He forgot them." (9:68)

All of the Prophets of God, including the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon each of them), accepted the 'way of Deen' in which Divinity guides humankind through selected veils. Archangel Jibril or Gabriel (peace be on him) was, and is, the locus of manifestation for the deliverance of Divine Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and, then, in turn, through the locus of manifestation of the Prophet, the Divine message was transmitted to all of humanity.

When asked by someone about the nature of the Prophet, 'Aisha, wife of the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with her), once said that he was like the Qur'an. Indeed, when God had taken all of the 'kernels' of the Qur'an and dyed the Prophet -- who is the highest expression of what is meant by taqwa and, therefore, the very sort of individual whom God had promised to teach -- with the spectrum of Quranic colors, how could the Prophet be other than a locus of manifestation of the guidance being transmitted through the Qur'an?

He and the Qur'an were one. Each is an appointed veil -- albeit of different, but complementary kinds -- through which God guides humanity.

Shaykhs are not Prophets, nor are they bearers of revelation. Yet, nonetheless, they are loci of manifestation of a mode of Divine guidance that is rooted in the being of the Prophetic tradition and the Books of Revelation, and, like the Qur'an and the Prophet, they are veils through which Divine guidance operates.

Divine generosity is poured into books of Revelation that, in turn, are poured into the spiritual capacity of the Prophets by means of the appointed guardian of the Divine Wine, archangel Jibril (Peace be on him). The Prophets, in turn, pour the same vintage stock into the cups of the shaykhs who, then, dispense it, God willing, to the bowls of the seekers -- "A Spring (Tasnim) where those brought near to Allah drink." (84:28)

The Wine is God's knowledge, love, mercy, compassion, and support. The loci of manifestation through which the wine is dispensed are the ones authorized at every level of Being to serve as God's appointed veils, and each veil-- from Revelation to seeker -- has its own Divinely sanctioned spiritual capacity and station through which to engage the Wine ... "None of us there is but has a known station." (37: 164)

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* compounds the errors present in his misunderstanding of the Sufi tradition, when he goes on to claim that Sufis “stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. On the theological level, Sufis speak of God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than they discuss His wrath, severity, and majesty.” The author is mistaken on each and every point within the foregoing quote.

The shaykhs of the Sufi path stress, balance, completeness, wholeness, harmony, moderation, and the golden mean that involves neither excesses of the left nor the right. All of these principles were taught by the Prophet and given eloquent expression through his life.

The Prophet did not stress inwardness over outwardness. He spoke and acted in a way that gave importance to both.

If, for example, the Prophet emphasized the importance of niyat or intention -- which is an inward process, he also gave importance to the kinds of outward activities with which this niyat was aligned. Having good or sincere intentions was not enough. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “To read the Qur’an without practicing what one reads is the same as not reading the Qur’an at all.”

The Prophet also is reported to have said: “No individual could be learned until one put one’s knowledge into action”. Another Hadith relates that ‘the Prophet came upon a group of people in a mosque near Medina who were reading the Qur’an. He is reported to have said to these people that unless they put it [i.e., that which they were reading] into practice, then, what they were reading was useless.’ And, there are many, many more sayings of the Prophet that emphasize this same point.

One has to struggle and make efforts to translate these intentions into outward behaviors of generosity, honesty, kindness, compassion, charitableness, love, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, and so on. Good deeds do, God willing, follow upon good intentions, but good deeds involves more than just good intentions.

All of the basic pillars of Islam -- from Shahadah or attestation, to ritual prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and zakat or charity -- all require effort, struggle, and outward expressions of the underlying niyat. For each facet of internal spiritual activity, there is a correlative manifestation of external activity

that bears witness to the degree of sincerity inherent in the original intention.

Moreover, the relationship between the internal and the external constitutes a feedback loop. For, just as the internal realm of spiritual awareness and understanding helps support whatever external acts might, with God's permission, arise out of that internal realm, at the same time, the doing of the external acts carries its own brand of barakah or Grace from God that is fed back into the individual's spiritual interior and helps cultivate and enhance the quality of the latter.

Similarly, if the original niyat is unsound or diseased, or if the original niyat is good but not acted upon, then, the activity that arises out of this internal activity leads to external behaviors that, in turn, feed back into the interior life in problematic ways. In short, we often do reap what we sow, and in the case of problematic behaviors, one of the consequences of such acts is to deplete the soil of important spiritual nutrients and, if this is permitted to go on long enough, the land will, eventually, be rendered infertile and, henceforth, incapable of giving rise to 'good' works.

The foregoing indicates that not only did the Prophet, who is the Shaykh of all Sufi shaykhs, not stress the inward over the outward, but he did not -- contrary to what the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* suggests in the aforementioned quote -- stress 'contemplation over action'. Instead, the Prophet taught, and acted, in accordance with this, that action needs to be informed by the fruits of spiritual contemplation, reflection, and insight, but the former should not be abandoned in favor of the latter.

For instance, in one Hadith of the Prophet, he is reported to have told a group of people that Satan would bait them with knowledge. When he was questioned about the meaning of his statement, he elaborated, saying that Satan would entreat people to master knowledge first before acting, and that those who fell under the spell of Satan's entreaties would, then, continue to seek knowledge while deferring action, finally dying, having done nothing.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* also indicated in the previously noted quote that Sufis give stress to "spiritual development over legalism". Although the Prophet did distinguish between, on the one hand, the sort of purely 'formal knowledge that does not go beyond verbal profession (and is the evidence of God against His people and according to it He will judge them)', and, on the other hand, 'genuine knowledge that is

deep-rooted in the heart and is the kind of knowledge that is useful', spiritual development was not given precedence over Shari 'ah or Divine law.

In fact, as a 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sufi shaykh from India noted, one of the many benefits and blessings that is enjoyed by those seekers who realize the purpose of the path, is that, by the Grace of God, they come to understand the true nature, meaning and significance of Shari 'ah for the first time. Consequently, while the author is right that the Sufi path does give emphasis to the importance of spiritual development over legalism, nonetheless, at the same time, one of the fruits of such spiritual development is the development of insight into the nature of Shari 'ah or Divine law -- which, among other things, entails gaining insight into how Divine law cannot, and should not, be reduced to mere legalisms.

Unfortunately, since the author never takes time to explain what he means by his use of the term "legalism", he leaves the door open for misunderstanding to enter into the discussion. More specifically, all too many people in the West -- and the East, as well -- will see such a remark as indicating that Sufis dispense with many, or all, facets of Shari 'ah or consider Shari 'ah to be a matter of mere legalisms, when nothing could be further from the truth.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Sufis also give stress to "cultivation of the soul over social interaction". If by the notion of 'social interaction' the author means frivolous, aimless, gossipy social chit-chat and play that squanders time better used to serve the purpose for which the gift of life has been bestowed on us, then, one might agree with the author.

However, once again, as is true of the author's use of words such as "legalism", along with many other terms appearing in his book, the author doesn't explain what he means by a word he uses. This failure to explicate, or provide, a context that would allow the reader to grasp the precise nature of what he is saying permits weeds of misunderstanding to grow from a soil of ambiguity.

Although there are times during the traversing of the path when a Sufi might withdraw into seclusion for a period of time lasting anywhere from 1 to 40 days in order to concentrate on engendering one's relationship with Divinity ["When We appointed for Moses forty nights." (2:51)], neither the Prophet nor Sufi shaykhs advocate avoidance of social interaction -- except when it is of a frivolous nature that diverts one's attention away from

observing one's spiritual duties to God, one's family, work, the community, or oneself.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The creation is as God's family, for its sustenance is from Him. Therefore, the most beloved unto God is the person who does good to God's family." The Prophet also is reported to have said: "God Almighty is the sustainer of all people. Among people, God loves best those of most benefit to others." Neither of the foregoing traditions is a call for one to remove oneself from social interaction -- rather, they are calls to something quite the opposite.

In another Hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Shall I tell you what actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being; to feed the hungry; to help the afflicted; to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful; to remove the wrongs of the injured." These actions are "most excellent" because they, simultaneously, give expression to a soul, that by the Mercy of God, has become cultivated, as well as provides opportunities through which the soul becomes further cultivated.

Furthermore, the Prophet did not say: to gladden the heart of Muslims; or, to feed just Muslims who are hungry; or, to help only Muslims who are afflicted, or, to lighten the sorrow of merely the Muslim sorrowful, or, to remove the wrongs of no one but Muslims who are injured. The statement was unqualified and open to anyone who was in need.

The Prophet also is reported to have said that: "You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not complete your faith until you love one another." Can anyone suppose that what the Prophet meant by loving one another was something devoid of social interaction, and can one suppose that this process of completing the faith involves anything but cultivation of the soul?

Everyone has an excellent chance of being kind, generous, thoughtful, forgiving, tolerant, charitable, noble, and loving in isolation. The truth of the matter is, however, that social interaction is not only the real proving grounds of sincerity and commitment with respect to the foregoing principles, but, in point of fact, it is through a seeker's interaction with others that the soul truly becomes cultivated under the watchful guidance of the shaykh.

Finally, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "On the theological level, Sufis speak of God's mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more

than they discuss His wrath, severity, and majesty.” Given that ‘theology’ tends to refer to a study of religious issues that culminates in a doctrinal and/or philosophical synthesis concerning those issues, Sufi shaykhs tend not to operate on, or out of, a “theological level”.

Spiritual transformation is not a matter of conceptual analysis, although there might be a restructuring of one’s conceptual understanding as a result of such transformation. Moreover, instructions concerning the Sufi path or discipline or Deen might be done, in part, through words, but the real activity -- both between teacher and seeker, as well as within the seeker -- is not primarily conceptual in nature ... although, once again, there are bound to be ramifications for the conceptual realm that are derivative in nature from the underlying spiritual activity.

The Prophet is reported to have said that: “There is a piece of flesh in the body. If that is sound, then, the whole body is sound. But, if that is corrupt, then, the whole body is corrupt, and that piece of flesh is the heart.” The Prophet was not talking here just in a medical or physiological way.

He was speaking of spirituality. If the spiritual heart -- which stands in relationship to the soul, as the physical heart stands in relationship to the body -- is corrupt, then, all which emanates from that piece of corruption will be likewise tainted.

Sound thinking is informed by a healthy spiritual heart. In fact, there cannot be soundness of thought until the heart is well on the road to spiritual health.

The attaining of a sound spiritual heart is not a matter of theology but, rather, is the result of a process that engenders practical, experiential, realization concerning the various states and stations of the heart. Adab, or spiritual etiquette, is not a function of theology but, is, instead, a function of a heart that is healthy spiritually.

While Sufi shaykhs do speak of “God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty”, they do not do this, as the author suggests, as a result of theological considerations. On the one hand, they mention these qualities because these are attributes by which God, Himself, has described Divinity in the Qur’an -- which is not a book of theology but a Book of Revelation.

On the other hand, Sufis mention qualities such as mercy, gentleness, and beauty, for a variety of psychological reasons. These qualities

are important aids for helping the seeker to be confident that she or he is, or they are, stepping onto a path, or traveling on a path, or is remaining committed to a path -- despite its many difficulties, problems and challenges -- that is lovingly embraced and supported by a God of mercy, gentleness and beauty.

In a Hadith Qudsi (which is God speaking through the mouth of the Prophet but is not considered to be a part of Revelation), God has declared that “My Mercy takes precedence over My wrath”. The Hadith does not say there is no such thing as Divine wrath, rigor, severity, justice, majesty, independence and so on, but that, ultimately, with respect to creation, Mercy has precedence over the former qualities.

There is a working principle of the Sufi path which indicates that no one attains to realization without tasting, if not imbibing, both the qualities of ‘jamal’ (i.e., mercy, gentleness, beauty, and so on) , as well as the qualities of ‘jalal’ (i.e., wrath, rigor, justice, severity, and so on). If it is true -- and for the purposes of the present discussion we will assume this to be so -- that the Sufis speak about “God’s mercy, gentleness and beauty far more than they discuss His wrath, severity, and majesty”, this is not because the latter qualities have no relevance to, nor bearing on, the nature of the path.

Al-insan al-kamil, or the realized human being, is one who provides a harmonious, judicious and balanced reflection of all of the Names and Attributes of God according to the God-given spiritual capacity of that individual to do so. This means both categories of Divine attributes -- jamal and jalal -- must be present.

Phenomenologically, qualities of jamal are experienced as ‘expansion’, whereas qualities of jalal tend to be experienced as ‘contraction’. But, to the realized individual, the words of Hazrat Mu’in-uddin Chishti (may Allah be pleased with him) ring true -- “Do not look at things as being good or bad. Is it not enough that they come from your Lord?”

From this perspective, the condition of contraction might give expression to jalali qualities of rigor, severity, and so on, but the contraction is experienced as being an instance of either ‘compassionate severity’ or ‘severe compassion’. This means that whatever the attendant difficulties of such a condition of contraction might be, the difficulties always are seen in the light of a Divine compassion that has brought such difficulties into one’s life so that, ultimately, a fuller and more complete dimension of Divine mercy might be shown to, and known by, the individual.

When a seeker starts out on the Sufi path, and, sometimes, even after some distance has been traveled on that journey, a person's spiritual strength might not be sufficiently developed or the individual's faith adequately rooted to be able to bear up under the presence of such Divine qualities as severity, rigor, majesty, and so on. However, a time might come during the mystical quest when further spiritual development requires an individual to engage, and/or be engaged by, the qualities of the jalal dimension of Reality.

If, and when, the latter stage of things is entered, the individual might gain a great many important, fundamental insights concerning the nature of the path, oneself, and one's relationship with Divinity -- things that are not possible to learn through purely jamali attributes. Yet, as important as this latter dimension of Reality might be with respect to becoming a complete and fully realized individual, why spend much time speaking of such things if the individual is not, yet, ready -- either psychologically or spiritually -- for them?



### 31 - Sufi Orders

Page 19 - Chapter Two: “The characteristic Sufi institutions - the “orders” or “paths” (tariqa) - did not begin to play a major role in Islamic history until about the twelfth century, but even after that time Sufism does not necessarily entail affiliation with an order.”

Commentary: One is uncertain just what the author means by referring to Orders as “characteristic Sufi institutions”. To begin with, his use of “characteristic” is problematic.

In what sense is an Order characteristic of the Sufi path? The author seems to be indicating that ‘Orders’ are institutions that are characteristic of the Sufi path, but an Order is not an institution --that is, it is not a corporate body, political group, educational infrastructure, or social organization that, primarily, has been established for any corporate, political, educational, or social purpose.

To be sure, from time to time, there might be some sort of spill -over into one, or another, social realm that arises out of the activity of an Order ... such as when the shaykh puts into effect an organized program, of one kind or another, to feed the hungry, or care for orphans, or help the poor. These kinds of efforts, however, are derivative from, and not the primary purpose for which the Order exists.

Furthermore, even if one were to consider an ‘Order’ to be an institution in some very loose sense of this term -- for example, as something established for a spiritual purpose -- the fact of the matter is that even in this sense the activities that go to the heart of a Sufi Order were established long before the twelfth century time line cited by the author.

Indeed, the Qur’an sanctions this manner of doing things when it states: “Lo! Allah loves those who battle for His cause in ranks, as if they were a solid structure.” (61:4) The cause of God is the realization of the purpose for which Creation came into being -- namely, to know, according to the way in which Divinity permits, the Hidden Treasure, and the ‘battle’ is, primarily, with those tendencies within ourselves that are rebellious toward, and resistant to, the Divine Intention concerning the purpose of Creation.

Finally, the ‘solid structure’ alluded to in the foregoing Quranic ayat is established when everyone associated with the shaykh is sincerely pursuing, and battling for, the aforementioned ‘cause of God’. By working in concert with one another for a common cause, under the direction of an

authorized shaykh, then, a 'space' is created within which people -- individually and collectively -- can struggle toward realization of life's purpose.

A Sufi Order gives expression to a process of seeking spiritual transformation through realization of essential identity and one's unique spiritual capacity. This process is rooted in a relationship with a spiritual guide or shaykh who has been authorized by God, via the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), to serve the purpose for which the Order exists.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "A person will be gathered (i.e., on the Day of Judgment) on the Deen of one's close friend, so let each of you look to the person one takes as a friend." Clearly, the relationship between a seeker and a spiritual guide is a friendship that is designed to prepare one for such a 'gathering'.

One can refer to the aforementioned process and relationship as Deen, Path, Way, Tariqa, Order, Silsilah, as well as the esoteric, inner, or mystical dimension of Islam. Moreover, even if there is only one seeker and one teacher, or one teacher and no seekers, and even if these two or one restrict their (or his/her) activities and focus to the spiritual process in question, there still would be an operative Order, Path, Way, Deen, Tariqa, or Silsilah.

On the other hand, one would be stretching, if not distorting, things if one were to attempt to maintain that this process that has been initiated constitutes an institution in any conventional sense of the term. In addition, to whatever extent this relationship might be considered an institution of some sort, the meaning of the latter becomes so vague as to be rendered a useless way of describing what is going on, and, therefore, can hardly be said to be a characteristic institution even though what is going on is quite characteristic of the Sufi path.

Divinity instituted the first Sufi Order, not man. The processes and activities encompassed by a Sufi Order came into being when God placed within human beings the potential for spiritual realization.

Certain aspects of this Sufi Order became outwardly manifest when Adam (peace be upon him) began to teach others about the essential purpose of Creation. Over time, there have been different variations on the essential theme that were introduced in order to accommodate various kinds of

personalities, temperaments, capacities, and historical circumstances, but the underlying purpose and goal of an Order never, ever changed.

Consequently, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is quite wrong when he contends that even after his alleged date of the origin of Orders (i.e., the twelfth century), “Sufism does not necessarily entail affiliation with an order.” He is incorrect because there can never be an affiliation with the Sufi path unless one has a relationship with a spiritual guide through whom Deen, God willing, is pursued or realized -- and this relationship embodies, so to speak, the essence of what an Order is ... that is, there is no Order apart from such a relationship.

Generally speaking, a seeker is initiated by a physically living teacher. There are occasions, however, and these are not the norm, in which an individual might be initiated into the Sufi path by a spiritually living teacher who is not biologically alive.

For example, some people have been directly initiated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) even though he passed away from this physical/material world more than 1400 years ago. Others have been directly initiated by Hazrat Khizr (may Allah be pleased with him and sanctify his spirit), who is sometimes referred to as a patron saint of the Sufi path, but who might not exist in a biological form (there is some debate over the identity of this spiritual figure).

Irrespective of whether an individual is initiated by a physically living or a non-physically living spiritual master, the process of initiation is the opening of the door to the Order, Path, Silsilah, Way, or Tariqa through which spiritual realization is pursued. Without the Order, or, more specifically, without the spiritual relationship that is at the heart of what an Order is, there can be no spiritual realization of an essential kind.

To be sure, beginning around the twelfth century and following, there were a number of centers of spiritual activity that arose, from time to time and from place to place, in conjunction with the spiritual presence and teachings of a number of Sufi saints such as: Hazrat Qadir Jilani, Hazrat Mu'in ud-din Chishti, Hazrat Shaha-bud-din Suhrawardi, and others (may Allah be pleased with them all) Just as the term “Sufi” eventually emerged as a linguistic way of labeling or making identifying reference to certain kinds of spiritual activities and teachings, so too, did the term “Order” emerge as a linguistic way of making reference to the teachings and activities that were

associated with these centers of spirituality that had crystallized in the form of the life of one, or another, saint and friend of God.

Nevertheless, just as the reality, to which the word “Sufi” attempts to make reference, had existed for many years prior to, and quite independently of this term, so too, did the reality, to which the word “Order” tries to make reference, exist for many years prior to, and quite independently of, the etymology of the term “Order”. Sometimes, academics get so caught up in words and concepts, the academics are unable to understand that their words are one thing, and the reality that those words seek to identify is, all too frequently, entirely something else.

All one has to do is look at the names of the Sufi shaykhs that constitute the spiritual lineage linking an initiate with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and, therefore, the rest of the Prophetic tradition, to realize that the reality underlying Sufi Orders did not begin in the twelfth century. One is not denigrating Hazrat Qadir Jilani or Hazrat Mu’in ud-din Chishti (may Allah be pleased with them), or any other Sufi shaykh if one says that Sufi Orders did not begin with them although, by the Grace of God, the force of their spiritual presence did set in motion a variety of events, activities, and so on that came to be associated with the term “Order”.

Any authentic shaykh would not only be extremely reluctant, but, in fact, would be loath to point to themselves as the initiator of a Sufi Order. They are merely passing on to others what had been passed on to them by their own shaykhs, just as their shaykhs, in turn, had passed on to such spiritual luminaries the transmission of Divine barakah or grace that had been passed on to the latter individuals by their own spiritual guides.

To assert, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does, that either Orders arose in the twelfth century or that it is possible to be on the Sufi path without being affiliated with an Order, is misleading in a very fundamental manner. The essence of what a Sufi Order involves has been around since the creation of humankind, and all authentic, Sufi shaykhs would unanimously agree that it is not possible to be on the Sufi path independently of the relationship that constitutes the essence of all Sufi Orders everywhere and throughout history.

32 - Fool For A Client

Page 19 - Chapter Two: "Specialists in the study of Sufism have reached no consensus as to what they are studying."

Commentary: If what the author is saying is true, then, this is all the more reason not to read anything these "specialists" have to say on the topic of the Sufi path. In fact, the problem with many such specialists is that they are only concerned with the "study of Sufism" and not at all with being practitioners of the Sufi path.

One does not become a scientist by studying books -- modern or ancient -- on science. One becomes a scientist by engaging the process of science and participating in the community life that constitutes science -- and the part of this process or community life that does involve reading is done from the perspective of one with a critical understanding rooted in experience and a seasoned appreciation of what goes on in science rather than the understanding of someone who has never done science in a professional manner.

Indeed, one does not become a plumber, electrician, mason, carpenter, athlete, or a skilled practitioner of any trade or profession merely by reading books. Only the arrogance of academia could suppose this to be otherwise.

Of course, a lot of academics consider themselves to be objective observers and impartial critics of a given area of study, and, as a result, often consider the understanding of those who are practitioners of, in this case, the Sufi path, to be too emotionally tied to the subject matter to be able to provide reliable insight into the nature of the path. Unfortunately, few of these academics ever raise questions concerning the assumptions, presuppositions, and/or lacunae inherent in their own concept of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality', and, consequently, all too many academics just end up chasing the tails of their own biases -- something that is especially true with respect to their attempt to fathom the nature of the Sufi path -- from a considerable distance. Using an electron microscope to photograph the moons of Jupiter would probably generate more reliable results.

Someone once said that an individual who is not a lawyer but wishes to defend himself or herself in a court of law has a fool for a client. Similarly, an academic who wishes to make pronouncements about the Sufi

path without first becoming a practitioner of this discipline stands a very good chance of, sooner or later, making a fool of himself or herself.

### 33 - Sciences of Deen

Page 20 - Chapter Two: “Ghazali (d. 1111) one of the greatest of the Sufi teachers, gave a nutshell description of Sufism’s role in the very title of his magnum opus. *Ihya’ ulum ad-din - Giving Life to the Sciences of the Religion*.

By “sciences” Ghazali means the various branches of learning that had proliferated in Islam after the Prophet.”

Commentary: Within the few short sentences of the foregoing quote, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* commits a number of mistakes. First of all, as pointed out in a previous Commentary, “religion” is not an appropriate translation of “din”.

Before he stepped onto the Sufi path, al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul) was a religious teacher who had an enormous following and considerable influence in government circles. Once he, finally, stepped onto the Sufi path, he gave all of this up -- including the religious or theological part - - because he came to understand there is a tremendous difference between that which he (prior to his becoming initiated by a Sufi shaykh and traveling on the Path) had been teaching in the form of a religion that was being called Islam but was, in truth, very different from the ‘din’ taught by the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). If this were not so, al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his spirit) never would have changed his mode of life from what it had been prior to becoming a Sufi, nor would he have experienced the many difficulties he did in trying to make the break from his former life and step onto the Sufi path, nor would he have felt compelled to write *Ihya’ ulum ad-din*.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* has translated the rest of the title of the aforementioned, multi-volume work as “Giving Life to the Sciences”. In truth, a better rendering of what the latter intended is: “The Revival of the Sciences of Deen”, for he wanted to reintroduce the Muslim community to the real teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ... sciences that once had been known and practiced but which, in the time of Hazrat al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul), were disappearing from the consciousness and understanding of an increasing number of people in the Muslim community.

One doesn’t have to give life to that which is sound and flourishing. One needs to give life to that which is in danger of withering and dying -- one needs to revive that which is in need of resuscitation.

Finally, the author of the quote on which the present commentary is focusing, maintains that: "By "sciences" Ghazali means the various branches of learning that had proliferated in Islam after the Prophet."

Actually, what the author claims to be the case is not so. Al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul) did not consider "sciences" to mean "the various branches of learning that had proliferated in Islam after the Prophet". The sciences he had in mind were those that were known to the Prophet and taught in the Qur'an, for there was absolutely nothing of value that proliferated in the Muslim community after the Prophet that could be anything but a reflection of what was taught by either the Qur'an or Muhammad (peace be upon him).

At one point in his monumental work, al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul) distinguishes between the science of revelation and the science of practical Deen and indicates that his writing will only deal with the latter since the former cannot be contained within a written work. Moreover, the sciences of practical Deen leave off where the science of revelation begins.

Interestingly enough, al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul) had a younger brother who was deeply immersed in the science of revelation -- a science that concerns the highest, deepest, richest, most subtle kinds of knowledge and understanding of which human beings are capable. As great a Sufi as the author of *Ihya' ulum ad-din* was and is, there are those who know even more than he did, and his brother was said to be one of these, although Allah knows best concerning such matters.

In any event, neither the science of revelation nor the sciences of practical Deen are disciplines that developed and proliferated after the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Indeed, as the title *Ihya' ulum ad-din* indicates, it was, instead, ignorance of the spiritual life that had proliferated, and al-Ghazali (may Allah sanctify his soul) was merely trying to re-direct the attention of Muslims back to the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur'an, and not to that which transpired after the Prophet passed away from the physical world.

### 34 - Etiquette

Page 21 - Chapter Two: "In communal gatherings, Sufis have usually performed dhikr aloud, often with musical accompaniment. In some Sufi groups, these communal sessions came to be considered the most important ritual, with a corresponding neglect of various other aspects of the Sunnah. At this point, Sufi practice became suspect not only in the eyes of the jurists, but also in the eyes of many of the Sufi teachers themselves."

Commentary: As is the case in many other parts of his book, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* makes unsubstantiated assertions. For instance, in the foregoing excerpt from his book, he claims that "Sufis have usually performed dhikr aloud, often with musical accompaniment."

This assertion is not merely unsubstantiated, it is incorrect, and this is so for a number of reasons. For example, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Do remembrance of your Lord in your soul, with supplication and taqwa, without your word being audible, at morning and evening," and, this Hadith demonstrates the inaccuracy of the author's foregoing assertion concerning how "Sufis have usually performed dhikr aloud".

Furthermore, whether one is speaking of the communal gatherings of modern day silsilahs or about the communal gatherings of Sufi silsilahs in the past, dhikr sessions are very rarely accompanied by music. To begin with, there are many silsilahs that do not permit music, and some silsilahs do not even permit singing unaccompanied by music. So, right away, a huge dent appears in his contention that Sufi groups "often" perform dhikr with musical accompaniment.

In addition, with respect to those silsilahs that, under certain conditions, do permit sacred music, the sessions of audition, sama or qawwali (i.e., times during which spiritual singing, music, or singing and music are permitted) tend, for the most part, to be kept separate from those dhikr sessions that are observed in a communal setting. Thus, once again the credibility of the author's use of "often" is further eroded.

Of course, when listening to sacred music, various individuals may do 'dhikr kafi' -- that is, silent dhikr while also listening to the music and/or singing. However, there is absolutely no way to verify how many individuals do this because these are private acts. Consequently, once again, even if one were to take this sort of activity into consideration while trying to assess the

validity of the author's assertion, it does not necessarily support what he is claiming -- especially given that his contention was not about silent dhikr but was about communal dhikr sessions that were said aloud.

There are some silsilahs, such as the Jerrahi-Halveti, in which participants in the 'sacred turning' do an audible dhikr as counterpoint to both the songs that are sung by the shaykh in praise of God, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and other spiritual luminaries, as well as the playing of different kinds of duff (a form of drum) that goes on at the same time. However, this sort of observance tends to be an exception to the rule -- although a perfectly valid exception -- that communal dhikr usually is not accompanied by music.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* goes on to claim that: "In some Sufi groups, these communal sessions came to be considered the most important ritual, with a corresponding neglect of various other aspects of the Sunnah." The author does not identify the Sufi groups to which he allegedly is alluding, and, therefore, one has no way to determine, empirically, the degree of truth, or lack thereof, in his claim.

Issues of evidence and proof aside, however, any group that, for whatever reason, sets aside, and neglects, "various other aspects of the Sunnah" loses the right to refer to itself as 'Sufi'. In fact, this very point highlights a contradictory tendency in the author's writing.

From time to time, the author has indicated in his book that the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are paramount to the Sufi path. At other times, he extends the label 'Sufi' to any and all groups who refer to themselves in this way, irrespective of whether, or not, these groups comply with the teachings that he has indicated, elsewhere, are of fundamental importance.

On the one hand, he wants to argue that it is very difficult to grasp the nature of the Sufi path because there are so many competing claims concerning what, precisely, this 'Way' entails. Yet, he, himself, is referring to groups as Sufi that dispense with or neglect the Sunnah of the Prophet as being Sufi, and, therefore, in doing so, helps add to the confusion.

Not only does the author fail to identify the groups he has in mind, but he is very vague about what aspects of the Sunnah of the Prophet are being neglected by such groups. The Sunnah of the Prophet covers a vast spectrum of behaviors -- ranging from, on the one hand, ritual prayer, fasting,

pilgrimage, and zakat (charity), to, on the other hand, expressions of kindness, generosity, honesty, sincerity, nobility, patience, constancy, forgiveness, love, tolerance, friendship, and so on.

All of the foregoing facets of Prophetic behavior can be observed with varying degrees of failure, competence, or excellence. Nonetheless, no one can claim to comply with any of the foregoing behaviors with the same degree of excellence exhibited by the Prophet -- not even remotely.

In truth, to varying degrees, we all fall short of his mark of excellence. Consequently, none of us should feel comfortable with pronouncing judgment on others with respect to what they are, and are not, able to accomplish in the way of compliance with the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

An individual might not be all that regular with prayer and fasting, but the same individual might believe, deeply, in the oneness of God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God, and, as a result, this individual might dedicate herself or himself to being kind, generous, loving, honest, just, forgiving, tolerant, and friendly. How will such a person fair on the Day of Judgment? In truth, no one knows.

The Prophet is reported to have said: "Shall I not inform you of a better act than fasting, alms and prayer? Making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the root." In another Hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Do you love your Creator? Then, love your fellow-beings first." In a further Hadith, The Prophet is reported to have said: "That person who relieves a Mu'min [an individual of deep spiritual faith] from distress in this world, God will, in like manner, relieve that person in the next world. And, the individual who does good to the indigent, God will do good to the former in this world and the next." Finally, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Be compassionate toward every creature, so that Allah may have mercy on you too."

As the foregoing sayings of the Prophet indicate, there are all kind of ways to please God. Prayer, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage -- as important as these are -- are not the only ways. Worship comes in many forms, and pity the individual who believes that the only things that are obligatory upon him or her are prayers, fasting, zakat, and pilgrimage, for the Sunnah of the Prophet encompasses more than these activities.

On one occasion, the Prophet is reported to have addressed some Companions in the following way. "You are with me and have seen me and if you should leave out even one-tenth of what is obligatory upon you, then, you will be denied Paradise. However, there will come a time when there will be a people who have not seen me and if they are able to do even one-tenth of what has been made obligatory upon them, then, they will attain Paradise." Has such a time come, yet? We do not know, but whether it has, or not, we should do whatever we can to encourage people to work toward living up to their spiritual potential, rather than chastise them for those spheres of activity that might, at the time, be deficient in one way or another -- as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them) is reported to have said: "Deal gently with people and be not harsh. Cheer them and do not condemn them."

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* doesn't identify which 'Sufi' groups he is talking about. He doesn't provide any empirical evidence that can corroborate that which he is asserting. He doesn't specify which Sunnah are being neglected. He doesn't demonstrate whether the groups to which he is alluding have a legitimate right to refer to themselves as Sufi as opposed to some other kind of group. In short, as far as what he has said is concerned, it would have been far better left unsaid.

The author concludes the section in question with: "At this point, Sufi practice became suspect not only in the eyes of the jurists, but also in the eyes of many of the Sufi teachers themselves." The "point" to which the author is referring here is marked by the alleged neglect of various Sunnah of the Prophet by groups, supposedly calling themselves 'Sufi', because, apparently, they prefer the communal sessions of music and dhikr to other dimensions of Deen.

A practice cannot be considered 'Sufi' unless it has been sanctioned by an authentic shaykh -- someone who has been authorized by Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). If a group of people come together and observe practices that they have picked up from a book or in some way other than through a legitimate source from whom permission has been received to engage in such a practice in a prescribed manner, then, the practice in question is not really Sufi -- irrespective of what the outward appearance might suggest.

Unless a jurist has first-hand knowledge of all of the details concerning such matters, then, this individual really has no right to harbor

suspicious with respect to these allegations, since the Prophet has warned against indulging in suspicions about others. In addition, Omar (may Allah be pleased with him), who was Caliph at the time the following 'incident' occurred, was reported to have been out walking one night with someone when they passed by a walled compound out of which various kinds of party-like noises were emanating. The person with the Caliph nodded in the direction of the compound and intimated, in a knowing sort of way, that something illicit was going on behind the walls. Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) who is known for being a staunch proponent of Shari 'ah and justice, is reported to have said: 'It is not our responsibility to sniff out the sins of others'.

Jurists ought not to harbor suspicions about that which they have no direct knowledge, and if they did have direct knowledge about such situations, then, they would not have to resort to suspicions concerning these matters, but, instead, they would have evidence which would demonstrate what was, and was not, going on in any given instance. Moreover, as far as that portion of the author's remarks are concerned that allude to what, supposedly, was going on "in the eyes of many of the Sufi teachers themselves", in point of fact, not only does the author have no evidential authority to make any statement about what was, or was not, going on in the 'eyes of many of the Sufi teachers', but the spiritual adab or etiquette that governs the way in which a Sufi shaykh approaches life is such that what the author maintains as having been in their eyes is not likely to have been so.



35 - History

Page 22 - Chapter 22: "Like most other Muslims, Sufis had little interest in the "history" of Islam, per se."

Commentary: Once again, the author's apparent predilection for making broad, sweeping generalizations in the absence of corroborating evidence is front and center. Be this as it may, however true his contention might, or might not, be with respect to the generality of Muslims, it is decidedly not true in the case of Sufis.

While Sufis might have little interest in Muslim history, they have an abiding interest in Islamic history. Muslim history concerns the events that transpire in relation to what Muslims do and/or what is done to them, and, unfortunately, this, all too frequently, has very little to do with Islam. Islamic history, on the other hand, focuses on the descent of Divine revelation, on the lives and teachings of the Prophets, on the lives and teachings of the close Companions of the Prophets, and on the lives and teachings of all the other friends of God.

Islamic history is about the sacred journey of individuals whose destination is the realization of essential identity and unique spiritual capacity as expressions of God's Divine Plan underlying and permeating the purpose for which Creation was originally brought forth. Islamic history is about the potential, and realization of, fitra or primordial spiritual capacity-- first of all in the Prophets, Companions and Saints, and, then, in all those who sincerely pursue Deen toward that same end.

Islamic history is not about culture, language, race, ethnicity, oil, politics, terrorism, social intrigues, economics, revolution, art, the destruction of Israel, architecture, fashion, careers, institutions, empires, ambition, exploitation, natural resources, technology, and the like. In fact, people who suppose that the foregoing elements are part of Islamic history, are not only confusing Muslim history with the former, but fail to understand, or appreciate, why the distinction is, unfortunately, necessary.

Islamic history is about God and God's relationship with the purpose of Creation. Muslim history is about Muslims and their relationship with themselves and others, and, as such, might be quite apart from, if not in conflict with, the spiritual potential that God placed in the care of human hands. Muslim history is not primarily concerned with what God wants but

with what Muslims want -- although all too many Muslims conflate and confuse the latter with the former.

### 36 - Purification

Page 22 - Chapter Two: “Those Sufi authors who studied the great figures of the past did so in order to show how exemplary Muslims achieved the goal of human life, that in their view was to live in the divine presence. Hence their typical genre was hagiography, which aims at describing the extraordinary human qualities of those who achieve nearness to God. In contrast, Muslim opponents of Sufism have been anxious to illustrate that Sufism is a distortion of Islam, and they were happy to seize on every opportunity to show that figures known as “Sufis” ignored the essentials of Islam, conspired with unbelief and heresy, and immersed themselves in moral laxity.”

Commentary: The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* begins the foregoing extended quotation with: “Those Sufi authors who studied the great figures of the past did so in order to show how exemplary Muslims achieved the goal of human life, that in their view was to live in the divine presence.” Actually, the author’s way of saying things is not quite correct.

In reality, we all, already, “live in the divine presence”. Things cannot be otherwise since all of creation is underwritten, circumscribed, and permeated by the Divine presence.

Some people do not know this at all. Other individuals suspect such is the case and, from time to time, might even feel this to be so to varying degrees. Still others experience this truth on an on-going basis.

Even if one were to give the author the benefit of the doubt and, for the purposes of this discussion, concede that what the author meant by his statement is, more or less, what has been said above, his contention is in need of further clarification and elaboration. To begin with, one has to ask the question: what is meant by the phrase: “live in the divine presence” because there are many ways to do so, just as there are many levels of being in the Divine presence.

There are spiritual stations of repentance, longing, patience, trust, gratitude, taqwa, and love -- all of which involve intimate, intense, but different, modalities of ‘living in the Divine presence’. Each of the aforementioned spiritual stations easily could be sub -divided into a series of experiential stages that focused on, or is preoccupied with, various dimensions of a given spiritual station, and any, or all, of these stages would be an expression of what it means -- at least in part -- to “live in the divine presence”.

For example, the station of love has been characterized in the following way by some Sufi observers. According to them, love begins with 'compatibility' and, then, if God wishes, proceeds to work its way through stages of inclination, fellowship, passion, friendship, exclusive friendship, ardent affection, enslavement, and, finally, bewilderment.

Each of these stages is to "live in the divine presence", just as the completed station of love is to "live in the divine presence", just as all of the other stations, or any of the stages within those respective stations, is to "live in the divine presence". Furthermore, because Divinity is infinite, one can never reach a point in which the Divine Plenitude can be exhausted, and, as a result, a point will never be reached in which one can say that "this" encompasses everything that is meant by the phrase "live in the divine presence".

Alternatively, one could speak about the spiritual conditions of 'fana' and 'baqa' -- both of which, but each in its own way, involve 'living in the Divine presence'. Briefly speaking, 'fana' is the spiritual condition in which one becomes absent to the false self as Divinity makes its Presence known to awareness with such overwhelming intensity that one loses track of everything but the Presence of Divinity. 'Baqa', on the other hand, is when the essential Self becomes realized as something individual within the context of the Divine Presence.

To be in 'fana' is to "live in the divine presence". To be in 'baqa' is to "live in the divine presence". Yet, 'fana' and 'baqa' are very different spiritual conditions.

The goal of the seeker is not to live in the Divine Presence since we already live in that Divine Presence whether we understand this or not. The goal of the seeker is not to reach some distant spiritual plateau where, all of a sudden, we will be said to "live in the divine presence", for the seeker needs to understand there are on-going goals that need to be realized at each step of the path -- namely, to recognize the presence of Divinity across a wide spectrum of modalities of manifestation, as well as to take from these engagements important experiential insights about oneself, life, the path, and one's constantly changing and developing relationship with Divinity.

Consequently, to say, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does, that the purpose of life is to "live in the divine presence" is not very helpful. In fact, if one waits for some spiritual juncture way down the Sufi

road that supposedly marks a 'terminus', of sorts, with respect to the spiritual journey and, at which time, one will be said to "live in the divine presence", one will have missed the opportunity "to live in the divine presence" through all the different states, conditions, stages, and stations of the Sufi path because all of these are but different modalities of God's living presence in the life of the seeker.

In truth, the purpose of life is to come to understand, and give expression to, the Divine Himma, or Divine Aspiration, that gave rise to Creation in the first place. In the Qur'an, God says: "I have not created human beings and jinn except that they may worship Me." (51:56-57) The crucial question, then, becomes: what is the nature of 'worship'?

Elsewhere in the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is instructed to proclaim the following: "Say: Surely, my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds". (6:162) While this ayat or verse is, first and foremost, true of the Prophet, the guidance being given is a prescription for the rest of humankind and jinn with respect to how to approach not only every act of worship but the uses to which the gift of life should be devoted.

Sincere worship is done from a niyat or intention that has no other goal than to be offered to God without any attached riders. Fear of Hell does not motivate the niyat. Desire for Paradise does not color this niyat. The hope of reward or return of any kind does not modulate such an intention. The niyat is formed without any expectations being associated with, or conditions imposed on, its existence. The sincere niyat is done without wishing that spiritual states, stations, or advancement will be forthcoming in exchange for the niyat.

Worship is not just ritual prayer (performed five times a day), or fasting (performed once a year), or pilgrimage (observed once in a life time). Worship encompasses one's whole life and the uses to which its seconds, minutes, weeks, months, years, and decades are put as a function of the underlying intentions out of which those uses arise.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Many are there among you who fast and, yet, gain nothing from it except hunger and thirst, and many are there who pray throughout the night and, yet, gain nothing from it except wakefulness." The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said that "God does not accept the prayer of the unaware heart".

A heart is unaware to the extent that it engages in prayer, or any kind of would-be acts of worship, due to intentions other than serving Divinity in the aforementioned, unconditional manner. The greater the degree to which motivations besides the purpose for which we were created enter into our intentions, hearts, and acts, then, to that extent, is the prayer or worship done through an unaware heart. On the other hand, that heart which observes worship through the proper niyat --an intention that sincerely serves the Divine purpose for which humankind and jinn were created, such a heart knows something of what it means to "live in the divine presence".

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The nearest a slave is to Allah is when that individual is in prostration." The heart, sirr, ruh, kafi, and aqfah all have their modality of prostration, and each of these gives different expression to what is entailed by living "in the divine presence".

On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Prayer is the sacrifice whereby every believer comes closer to God". Therefore, anything that permits one to struggle against permitting the false self to corrupt the sincerity of niyat is a form of prayer since it constitutes a sacrifice that, God willing, brings one closer to Allah by virtue of the way it helps to serve the purpose for which one has been created.

The Qur'an indicates that: "Whoever submits one's whole self to Allah and is a doer of good has, indeed, grasped the most trustworthy handhold."(31 :22) When an individual truly and sincerely submits his or her whole self to God, then, everything which is manifested through that individual becomes an act of worship, and, therefore, is a expression of goodness ... or, one can switch the foregoing around and say that the goodness which, by the Grace of God, is expressed through a sincere intention -- one that constitutes an unconditional commitment to serve only Divinity -- such an intention becomes an act of worship.

What and who is this "self" to which the Qur'an is directing our attention in the foregoing verse? Moreover, what is meant by the submission of the 'whole' self, and what are the means through which one brings this self wholly to abandonment of all goals, aspirations, hopes, dreams, wishes, and desires other than the purpose of our creation -- that is, what is the means and nature of the submission that is mentioned in the Quranic verse above?

The self in question is our 'fitra' or primordial spiritual potential. The method of submission is Deen, and the whole Self has abandoned 'other' than Divinity -- that is, submitted -- only when the path of Deen has been traversed through all its stations. This is the realized Self whose every act is an expression of the kind of worship that God wished for humankind and jinn who had been created for just that purpose, and only that purpose.

Surah Shams of the Qur'an begins in the following manner:

"In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Beneficent, By the sun and his brightness,

And, by the moon when she follows him,

And, by the day that reveals him,

And, by the night that enshrouds him,

And, by the heavens and Him Who built it, And, by the earth and Him Who spread it, And, by the soul and Him Who created it,

Teaching it knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing, The one who purifies one's soul succeeds, and

The one who corrupts one's soul fails."

A Sufi saint of the twentieth century has said, in conjunction with the foregoing portion of the Qur'an, that the rhetorical style of the Qur'an is such that whenever God wishes to bring something to the attention of the one engaging the Book of Revelation, then, a succession of oaths are employed prior to a given principle or precept in order to lend stress and emphasis to the importance of what is being related.

This Sufi saint has said that nowhere else in the Qur'an does one find so many oaths in succession as one does in the passage quoted above from Surah Shams.

The principle or precept to which our attention is being directed is this. The one who purifies his or her soul succeeds, and the one who corrupts his or her soul fails.

All purification begins with niyat or intention. All corruption begins with niyat or intention.

Niyat is the primary battleground of spiritual struggle. Furthermore, while ritual prayer, fasting, zakat, and pilgrimage can, if God wishes, all lend logistical support to such a struggle, nevertheless, the basic pillars of Islam do not exhaust the possibilities of Deen, and, in fact, the

individual's observance of these pillars stands in need, itself, of various kinds of purification that are accessible only through other dimensions of Deen.

The cure for an unaware heart is not more prayers or acts of worship from the same unaware heart. The remedy for an unaware heart is that which, if God wishes, will purge the condition of being unaware from the precincts of the heart, and since the heart is a complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered spiritual instrument, purification is not necessarily accomplished overnight or in a simplistic, linear manner.

The goal of the Sufi path is not, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains, just to "live in the divine presence". Rather, the goal is to realize the most purified condition that is available to each of us as individuals, and this goal is only achieved when, through the process of purification that constitutes Deen, we come to know who we are in essence and, simultaneously, are able to give, God willing, full expression to the unique spiritual capacity that Divinity has gifted us as our means of worshiping Allah ... fully, wholly, completely, sincerely, truly, and freely.

### 37 - Hagiography

Page 22 - Chapter 22: “Those Sufi authors who studied the great figures of the past did so in order to show how exemplary Muslims achieved the goal of human life.... Hence their typical genre was hagiography, that aims at describing the extraordinary human qualities of those who achieve nearness to God.

Commentary: While studying spiritually luminous individuals of the past can be an important source of guidance, inspiration, encouragement, strength, support, and ‘food’ for reflection, such exploration will never show how “exemplary Muslims achieved the goal of life.” This is so for a number of reasons.

In ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami’s *Book of Futuwwah* one finds the following puzzle. “What meeting takes place but is never observed, and what departure is observed but never takes place?” The answer that emerges shortly thereafter revolves around the ‘meeting and departure of those who are spiritually in love’.

To look only at outward behavior or only at acts that can be observed as the cause or explanation for how one achieves ‘the goal of human life’, is like assuming the tip of an iceberg is the whole story and that the surface of things is more substantial than that which remains concealed. We cannot see the intentionality, sincerity, love, longing, taqwa, certainty, kashf (unveiling), or states and stations, of another human being, and, yet, within these realms is where the purpose of life is actually pursued, and, if God wishes, realized.

To be sure, some of the spiritual intensity, depth, richness, subtlety, breadth, and luminosity of these inner realms do, often (but not always -- see the discussion below about those saints and friends of God who are, for the most part, invisible to most of us), manifest themselves in the behavior and actions of a friend of God. However, these behaviors or actions are the result of, rather than the cause of, having achieved the purpose of life.

Hazrat Junayd (may Allah be pleased with him) who is one of the great lights of the Sufi path once said that ‘The enlightened individual is one who refuses to place trust in three things: (a) knowledge; (b) action; and (c) seclusion.’ As long as one places one’s trust in such things, then, the individual’s understanding of the true Source of realization is defective.

The foregoing does not mean one should not seek spiritual knowledge, or that one should not seek to perform good deeds, or that one should not undertake whatever Sufi practices one might be given by the shaykh. What it means is that those who place their trust in other than Divinity are sowing the seeds of shirk (polytheism) and kufr (unbelief).

Knowledge, per se, will not spiritually transform us, nor will action, in and of itself, spiritually transform us, nor will Sufi practices, such as going into seclusion, necessarily transform us in any spiritually essential way. The key to the beginnings of spiritual transformation is the love that arises through the nisbath or inner relationship that links the 'Seeker' with the 'Sought'.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "True faith is realized when I and Allah become dearest to you." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "None of you can have perfect faith till I become dearer to you than your father, children, and all humankind."

The road to faith travels through the domain of love. In fact, contrary to the aforementioned claim of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* -- which indicates that Sufis study the lives of the saints in order to see how the purpose of life is achieved through "extraordinary human qualities" -- if one approaches the hagiographies of the friends of God in an appropriate manner, one does not so much see how the purpose of life is achieved as much as the individual is introduced to one of the most fundamental venues of spiritual transformation on the Sufi path -- namely, one begins to fall in love with the lovers of God, and if this seedling of love is nurtured through the presence of nisbath with an authentic shaykh, then, the seeker begins, God willing, to make progress toward realizing the purpose of life.

Hagiography, which focuses on the lives of saints, is not necessarily preoccupied with "describing the extraordinary human qualities of those who achieve nearness to God." For instance, there have been many who achieve nearness to God whose lives are known to few and about whom nothing has been written.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: 'God loves best those servants who are pious and hidden. When they are away no one misses them, and when they are present, they are ignored. These are the imams of good guidance and the torches of Knowledge.'

In another Hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said: 'There are those, with unkempt hair, whose possessions amount to no more than a couple of dates, whom no one wants to look at, but whom might, if such individuals appeal, in supplication, to God, have their prayers answered.'

Finally, God, through several Hadith Qudsi, is reported to have said, via the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): (1) "The most enviable of My awliya close to Me is a believer whose possessions are few, whose joy is prayer, who accomplishes the service of one's Lord to perfection and obeys God in secret. This person is obscure among human beings, and no one points to this person." (2) My saints are beneath My canopies. None knows them but Me."

Consequently, hagiography actually only deals with a very limited sample drawn from a much larger population of saints. In fact, as the foregoing Hadiths indicate, the people who become known might even be of a lesser spiritual stature than those with respect to which no hagiographies were ever written.

Furthermore, hagiographies do not just consist of a litany of "extraordinary human qualities". Such works are biographies whose special focus happens to be upon saints of one sort or another.

A hagiography often involves material about parents and their spiritual qualities, as well as the nature and character of the early years of a given saint, along with information about education, formative events, cultural milieu, important teachers, travels, and so on. In addition, a hagiography often includes material on, and excerpts from, various facets of the individual's writings, teachings, sayings, aphorisms, poetry, and whatever else seems of value or importance in relation to the life being explored.

In short, hagiography tends to revolve about much more than just "describing the extraordinary human qualities of those who achieve nearness to God." If a hagiography were just about 'extraordinary human qualities', if it were just an account of a remarkable woman or man, then, other than our being amazed with the fact that people of such spiritual caliber have existed at some point in the past -- recent or distant -- the lives of the saints would have little relevance to us as individuals.

Hagiography explores human potential. It discusses the problems, difficulties, questions, struggles, issues, opportunities, setbacks, and possibilities of life that resonate with many of those who read these books.

Hagiography informs, instructs, inspires, cautions, entertains, and invites with respect to the realm of spirituality. Hagiography induces a reader to reflect upon his or her own life and helps incline one to want to be a better person.

However, most of all, hagiography is a love story. It is a story about an individual's love for truth, as well as that person's love for those who are purveyors and distributors of that truth.

It is a story about the individual's love for his or her shaykh(s), and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and Allah, and for the spiritual potential that God has placed in the individual. It is a story about the individual's love for learning about, and realizing, the purpose of Creation.

The extraordinary thing is that the subjects of many, if not most, hagiographies do not consider themselves to be extraordinary in any way, or to possess "extraordinary human qualities". They would credit Divinity for all the extraordinary aspects of their lives, or they would give credit for the loving, compassionate, generous, kind guidance, encouragement, and support of their own teachers and spiritual guides.

They tend to look at themselves as ordinary human beings for whom, by the Grace of God, extraordinary things have happened. And, the underlying message is that what has happened in relation to them can, in ways that are unique to each individual, happen to any one of us ... if we are willing to open ourselves up to the extraordinary dimensions of Being that both surround us, and are within us.

Finally, although the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that hagiography was the typical genre of the Sufis, what this claim is based upon is not only unstated but well might be untrue. Al-Hujwiri's *Kashf Al-Mahjub*, or al-Ghazali's *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*, or Farid ud-din Attar's *Parliament of the Birds*, or Shaykh MuhyidDeen Abdul-Qadir Jilani's *Al-Fathu Rabbani*, or Rumi's *Mathnawi* and *Discourses*, or ibn al-'Arabi's *Bezels of Wisdom* and *Meccan Openings*, or Abu Bakr al-Kalabahdi's *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, or ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami's *Futuwwah*, or Hazrat Maneri's *Hundred Letters*, or Matin Lings's *Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, along with hundreds, if not thousands,

of other Sufi works are not primarily hagiographies -- even though they all might contain material on the extraordinary qualities of this or that Sufi saint.

Instead, these works are books of instructions concerning the nature, purpose, methods, adab, states, stations, origins, and problems of the Sufi path. Extracts from the lives of various saints might have been used for illustrative purposes, and as instructional reminders, during the elaboration upon this or that point/principle/issue, but so were Quranic commentaries, Hadiths, poetry, stories, discourse, history, and personal experience used for these same ends.



38 - Matter of Style

Page 22 - Chapter Two: "In contrast, Muslim opponents of Sufism have been anxious to illustrate that Sufism is a distortion of Islam, and they were happy to seize on every opportunity to show that figures known as "Sufis" ignored the essentials of Islam, conspired with unbelief and heresy, and immersed themselves in moral laxity."

Commentary: The foregoing follows upon, and is a continuation of, the quoted excerpts on which the previous two commentaries are based. The "contrast" to which the author allegedly is referring involves, on the one hand, the, supposedly, 'typical' genre of hagiography written by the Sufis that seeks to provide, according to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, illustrations of the "extraordinary human qualities" of Sufi saints and, thereby, serve as spiritual models. On the other hand, and in contrast to the above, are the writings of those who are hostile to the Sufi path and, consequently, are "anxious to illustrate that Sufism is a distortion of Islam."

Contrary to the author's apparent perspective, the "contrast" being alluded to is not primarily a matter of those who are pro-Sufi and anti-Sufi, although, to be sure, this element is present. The real 'contrast' is one of style, approach, and focus -- a contrast that is somewhat reminiscent of different people's way of going about a political campaign.

More specifically, there are some people who merely wish to outline or describe their political positions, purposes, programs and policies, and, as well, argue for these in a positive, constructive fashion, perhaps speaking about the potential benefits that might accrue if such programs, policies, and the like, were pursued. Then, there are those individuals who might, or might not have, political positions, purposes, programs, and so on of their own, but who seem more inclined to spend their time engaged in denigrating the people who are their political opponents than spend their time in developing, introducing, or explaining, their own political position -- that is, they tend to define themselves not so much by what they are for but whom they are against.

The latter group tends to be preoccupied with an endless array of allegations, accusations, name-calling, rumor spreading, dirty tricks, and personal attacks that are designed to create an unfavorable impression that often is quite independent of actual political issues. Apparently, the reasoning underlying this sort of style, approach, and focus revolves around a reverse 'halo' effect in which if one tarnishes the reputation of an

individual, this lays the ground for a residual or collateral tarnishing of the political positions, programs, policies, and purposes associated with the candidate whose integrity and character are being assailed.

Similarly, when the subject of the Sufi path comes up, there are those who seek to describe, as well as expound upon, the nature, purpose, and methodology of this path. On the other hand, there are those who do not seem content with putting forth their own understanding of the nature of Deen and the purpose of life but who, apparently, feel compelled to spend time, instead, casting aspersions on this or that Sufi.

Just as is the case in all too many political campaigns, one sees all manner of fabrications, invented information, and manufactured stories being introduced into the debate about the Sufi path by people who might do everyone a greater service if they were to stick to issues and not become entangled in such creative endeavors. People who are overly “anxious to illustrate that Sufism is a distortion of Islam”, usually have very little, if any, understanding of the Sufi path, and whatever ‘information’ (if one can call it that) they do have is usually either: (1) gleaned from non-Sufi sources; or, (2) is based on positions and/or statements that have been both taken out of context, as well as distorted/misunderstood; or, (3) is not rooted in direct, personal experience of the Sufi path; or, (4) some combination of the foregoing factors.

Books like *Sufism: A Short Introduction* are somewhat interesting variations on the foregoing themes -- although ultimately very problematic -- because they often try to pass themselves off as constructive, positive, friendly instances of just reporting or uncovering the basic ‘facts’ and ideas of the Sufi path. In reality, however, all too frequently, they actually are engaged, knowingly or unknowingly, in relating various kinds of unsubstantiated assertions, confused contentions, distortions of basic Sufi doctrine, as well as fundamental failures of understanding concerning important dimensions of the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam.

As a result, the errors that are introduced through such books by the use of words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that are built on a shaky, problematic, or non-existent foundation of understanding with respect to the Sufi path can require a great deal of work in order for the damage that has been inflicted in such a relatively short space to be remedied. The present set of commentaries on *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is a case in point.

According to the author of the aforementioned book, the opponents of the Sufi path were “happy to seize on every opportunity to show that figures known as “Sufis” ignored the essentials of Islam, conspired with unbelief and heresy, and immersed themselves in moral laxity.” What we are not told is: whether every such “opportunity” was based upon facts or merely manufactured and imagined; or, precisely how the “essentials of Islam” were being ignored by Sufis; or, exactly how Sufis knowingly “conspired with unbelief and heresy”; or, the specifics of the charges involving “moral laxity”.

What are the ‘essentials of Islam’, and what justifies one in claiming this? What are ‘unbelief’ and ‘heresy’? What is ‘moral laxity’?

The author had a great opportunity to critically explore a number of important spiritual issues that would help demarcate and clarify the Sufi perspective, but he let it slip by. In fact, not only did the author introduce a number of innuendoes from anonymous sources, he also left them unchallenged.

For instance, in conjunction with the aforementioned theme of “heresy” that is often hurled at the Sufi path, the author might have had a brief discussion about the frequently associated notion of “bi’dat” or innovation. In other words, one of the factors that leads some individuals to consider the Sufi path heretical is because, according to the people making this sort of charge, the Sufi path introduces a variety of innovative practices.

Usually, such people cite a number of Hadiths of the Prophet in which he warned against introducing innovation into Deen. They also like to cite the severe condemnation and penalties that are said to be awaiting those who commit bi’dat.

Unfortunately, many of these same people place their own interpretations on what bi’dat is and what is entailed by the principle(s) at issue. Moreover, they fail to take into consideration other Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that might call into question their understanding of, and insight into, this issue.

Thus, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “If a person sets down in Islam a good custom [sunna hasana] that is put into practice, that person will have written for oneself the wage of those who put it into practice, while nothing will be diminished from their wages. Yet, if a person sets down in Islam a bad custom that is put into

practice, then, this person will have written for him, the load of those who put it into practice, while nothing will be diminished from their loads.”

The establishing of a custom is to introduce something new. In other words, the new custom is an innovation, for if it were not an innovation, then, no custom would need to be established since it already would be in existence, and, furthermore, there would have been no need for the Prophet to address such an issue in the foregoing Hadith.

Obviously, not all innovations are necessarily of the kind about which the Prophet gave warning and which those hostile toward the Sufi path like to make reference. Some innovations are good and, therefore, serve the purpose of Deen.

For example, Hazrat ‘Umar (may Allah be please with him) established the custom of performing, in congregation, the tarrawih prayers during the month of Ramazan (period of fasting). This was done, despite the fact that -- with the exception of three occasions, on consecutive days -- the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) observed these prayers in private and not in congregation.

Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) described his introduction of the congregational observance of tarrawih prayers as an instance of ‘bi’dat hasanatan’. In other words, it constituted a ‘good innovation’.

The principles of Islamic jurisprudence indicate that certain conditions must hold if a given practice is to qualify as being an instance of the problematic kind of bi’dat or innovation about which the Prophet sought to warn people. More specifically, if someone tries to claim that compliance with an innovation will necessarily lead to Paradise, or that failure to do so will lead to spiritual ruination, or if the intention underlying such an innovation is something other than to help enhance the spiritual life of the community, then, such an innovation is to be avoided.

Whenever authentic shaykhs have established certain customs in relation to the Sufi path, they have done so in accordance with the spirit of the aforementioned Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the cited example of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), as well as the previously noted requirements of Islamic jurisprudence. In other words, they have not said that observance of the custom will guarantee Paradise, or that failure to observe the custom is tantamount to spiritual ruination. Moreover,

their niyat for introducing a given custom or practice was, God willing, to help enhance and strengthen the faith --both individually and collectively-- of those who complied with the custom.



### 39 - Conflict

Page 22 - Chapter Two: “The internal, Islamic attacks on Sufism that often have been made over history have many causes. Not least has been the social and political influence of Sufi teachers, which often threatened the power and privileges of the jurists and even the rulers.”

Commentary: The author’s phrase: “The internal, Islamic attacks on Sufism”, is incorrect. The attacks were not Islamic ones, but, rather, the work of Muslims who failed to understand the tremendous breadth, depth, richness, and subtlety of the Islamic religious dimension considered as a whole, rather than from some limited, truncated, theological perspective.

The author goes on to say there were ‘many’ causes of these attacks. In actuality, there were only four causes for the attacks -- namely, nafsi amaara (the rebellious self), dunya (the network of spiritually destructive entanglements generated by the self-serving efforts of a multiplicity of rebellious capacities working in opposition to one another), Iblis (that is, Satan, who after falling from Grace asked for a period of respite, that was granted by God, which Iblis, then, vowed to use to sway human beings from the ‘straight path’), and unbelievers (those who, irrespective of their ethnic, cultural, racial, linguistic, and sexual identity, either did not believe in God or who were intent on sacrificing the Presence of God on the altar of their own conceptual likes and dislikes.).

For example, the author indicates that two of the sources of attack -- among the many other, unnamed causes to which he alludes -- were “the social and political influence of Sufi teachers, that often threatened the power and privileges of the jurists and even the rulers.” In truth, the desire to acquire, or hold on to, power and privilege, is nothing more than an expression of how nafsi amaara, dunya, Iblis and unbelievers often collude in the attempt to serve their respective ends. There are, to be sure, many permutations and combinations that arise out of how the rebellious soul, dunya, Iblis, and unbelievers can conjoin to spread spiritual disaffection throughout the Earth.

Nonetheless, the underlying causes are, at most, four, and, in a more fundamental sense, really, reduce down to just one cause --the tendency of the rebellious soul, whether in humankind or jinn -- to wreak havoc ... for itself and for others.

The author doesn't elaborate on just how Sufi teachers supposedly "threatened the power and privileges of the jurists, and even the rulers". Can one suppose that Sufi shaykhs were part of some underground, guerilla movement preoccupied with devising strategies about how to wrestle power and privilege from those already entrenched in that which the Sufi shaykhs sought?

In truth, the vast majority of Sufi shaykhs, as well as those mureeds or followers who were sincere and serious in adhering to the teachings of their shaykhs, were averse to power, privilege, or influence in the political process. Furthermore, they were not initiators of, nor participants in, guerilla movements and rebellious uprisings.

Sufi shaykhs implemented a model that had been followed by the Prophets for thousands of years. More specifically, whenever possible, Prophets shied away from confrontation with, or armed struggle against, worldly powers unless given permission by God to defend themselves under certain conditions.

For instance, Noah (peace be upon him) was not told to take up arms against the unbelief and spiritual corruption that prevailed during his times. Instead, he was told to build an ark and leave the rest to God.

Lot (peace be upon him) was not told to do physical battle with the various forms of iniquity with which his locality was infested. He was told to steal away in the dark of night.

Moses (peace be upon him) was not told to organize the Jewish tribes into an army that would do physical battle with the Pharaoh. They were told to run away across the Red Sea.

Jesus (peace be upon him) was not told to engage the Roman Empire in armed warfare. Instead, he was inspired to counsel others to turn the other cheek, and he applied to himself that which he recommended to others.

Initially, Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not instructed by God to physically resist the physical attacks and various intrigues that were perpetrated by various Arab tribes. In fact, for thirteen years, the Prophet and other Muslims were instructed by God to endure, with patience, the numerous attacks, privations, abuses, humiliations, and plots leveled against the fledgling community by a hostile tribal power structure.

Indeed, even when the Arab tribal leaders finally decided to assassinate the Prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not told to

physically repel such an attempt. Instead, he was told to take flight and go to Yathrib (now Medina) several hundred miles to the northeast.

Only after the tribal leaders declared war on the Prophet and the Muslim community in Medina, and only after those leaders were prepared to launch an armed attack with a force that was substantially bigger than, and far better equipped than, the Muslim community, did Revelation come from God giving the Prophet permission to allow the Muslim community in Medina to defend itself against armed aggression -- and, even then, the permission was of a limited nature. For instance, in the various battles that took place over a number of years (and in each case the Arab tribal leaders and their allies were the aggressors), there were only a little over three hundred people who lost their lives -- both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Although the loss of any life is a cause for sorrow, the Prophet established rules of engagement that were designed to keep casualties on all sides to a minimum. For example, the Prophet stipulated that women, children, and old people were non-combatants and could not be harmed. In addition, he indicated that the crops or means of livelihood of the opposing side could not be harmed.

Eventually, after a number of battles -- spread out over a span of years -- the Prophet assembled an army of some 10,000 people and marched on Mecca. When this army reached the outskirts of Mecca, word quickly spread, and the Meccans realized they were no match for the army that was at its gates.

Despite all the abuses that the Meccans had heaped upon the Muslims over many years, and despite all of the transgressions they had committed against the Prophet and the Muslim community, Mecca was conquered without a single drop of blood being spilled. In fact, when the conquest had been completed and the leaders of the Meccans had been assembled, the latter group fully expected to be executed by their conqueror, but, instead, the Prophet said: "On this day, I find no fault with you" and not only let them go free, but he, as well, appointed some of them as administrative heads of Mecca before he departed and returned to Medina.

Throughout his life, whenever the Prophet was given the choice between peace and conflict, he always took the path of peace. Similarly, whenever the Prophet was given the choice between forgiveness and enmity, he chose forgiveness.

Given that Sufi shaykhs, in particular, and Sufis, in general, look to the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a role model for conduct in life, one needs, again, to raise the question that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does not explore when the latter speaks of “the social and political influence of Sufi teachers, which often threatened the power and privileges of the jurists and even the rulers.” This unaddressed question revolves about the precise nature of the ‘threat’ that jurists and rulers allegedly felt in relation to Sufi teachers.

Undoubtedly, there were some, unknown number of jurists and rulers who, from time to time, and from place to place, might have felt threatened by Sufi teachers. However, the term “often” that is employed by the author is much too vague and unsubstantiated to be permitted to stand unchallenged.

The Muslim world has been in existence for over 1400 years, and this world covers many geographical regions, peoples, cultures, and historical eras. On various occasions and in different places, the Sufi influence not only has been appreciated, but even sought out, by those in power -- although, as a general principle, Sufi teachers have tried to maintain as much spiritual distance as possible between themselves and the centers of political power and have counseled their followers do likewise.

On other occasions and in other places the relationship between the Sufi shaykhs and the political centers of power has been neither hostile nor overly friendly. In effect, during such times and places, the two lived in separate domains and didn’t have much contact, or much to do, with one another.

Of course, on some occasions and in some places, there was an attempt by some rulers and/or jurists to generate friction with respect to the Sufi shaykhs. This might have been done for this or that political and/or theological purpose, but it always was the result of a basic ignorance about, and misunderstanding of, the nature of the Sufi path.

Spiritual ignorance is one of the qualities of nafsī amaara. Those who are operating under the sphere of influence of this dimension of the soul feel threatened by many things -- not just Sufi shaykhs.

One day nafsī amaara growls and snaps at a Sufi shaykh. The next day it growls and barks at someone else -- whomever happens to be the target of opportunity de jure.

In any event, contrary to the aforementioned assertion of the author, those doctrinal attacks that were directed against the Sufi teachers were not Islamic in nature. In fact, the 'attack-mode' is not part of the Islamic framework.

Islam enjoins people to consult, discuss, explore, listen, clarify, reflect, develop, expound, study, learn, and reason about issues. It does not encourage anyone to attack others -- physically, emotionally, conceptually, economically, or in any other fashion -- and, to the extent anyone feels compelled to attack others, such an individual has, to use a recurring phrase of the Qur'an, 'transgressed beyond bounds' and, therefore, cannot justify what he or she is doing as being Islamic.



40 - 'Sufi' Label

Page 22 - Chapter Two: “Moreover, even though the great Sufi authorities set down guidelines for keeping Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition, popular religious movements sometimes appeared that were aimed at intensifying religious experience with little concern for Islamic forms, and these frequently became associated with Sufism, and grew out of certain sorts of Sufi teaching and practices. Whether or not the members of these movements considered themselves Sufis, opponents of Sufism were happy to claim that their excesses represented Sufism’s true nature. Sufi teachers themselves frequently criticized false Sufis, and the dangers connected with loss of contact with the living core of Islam could only increase when much of Sufism became institutionalized through the Sufi orders.”

Commentary: The author is incorrect when he contends that “the great Sufi authorities set down guidelines for keeping Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition”. The ‘great Sufi authorities’, along with the lesser Sufi authorities, did not teach anything that was not in accordance with the teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunnah (conduct) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Whatever guidelines these people set down, they did so as expressions of principles, values, guidelines, and teachings that already were inherent in the Qur’an and the conduct of the Prophet.

Hazrat Junayd (may Allah be pleased with him), who often is identified with the so-called ‘sober’ approach to the Sufi path (in contrast with the outwardly intoxicated ecstatic modality), once said: “This knowledge of ours is delimited by the Book (i.e., Qur’an) and the Sunnah”, and another Sufi master has written: “Every unveiling not borne witness to by the Book and the Sunnah is nothing.”

No one has to keep “Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition” because the former ‘Way’ already is centered and could not be otherwise for it gives expression to the very essence of the purpose and nature of Islam. If one finds some set of principles and practices that are not “at the heart of the Islamic tradition”, then, this set of values is not part of the Sufi path.

The author continues on by claiming that despite the supposed efforts of Sufi teachers to set down guidelines that allegedly were designed to keep “Sufism squarely at the heart of the Islamic tradition”, nonetheless, “popular religious movements sometimes appeared that were aimed at

intensifying religious experience with little concern for Islamic forms.” The author does not identify what these “popular religious movements” were, nor what made them popular, nor what sorts of ‘religious experiences’ these movements were “aimed at intensifying” nor how they proposed to do this, nor why. In addition, the author does not give any of the details of how such movements displayed “little concern for Islamic forms”.

Everything being said is vague and unsubstantiated. In fact, we don’t even know what, if any, connection there is between Sufi shaykhs and such “popular religious movements” -- although, certainly, the author’s manner of placing the two (i.e., Sufi teachers and “popular religious movements”) in juxtaposition to one another, creates the impression that Sufi teachers somehow failed to control these movements -- as if the teachers were the ones who not only were responsible for unleashing these movements but responsible, as well, for keeping them in check once they arose.

The author contends that the aforementioned popular religious movements “frequently became associated with Sufism, and grew out of certain sorts of Sufi teaching and practices.” Unfortunately, he fails to explain just how these links of association came into being or who was responsible for the forging of such links.

Furthermore, he does not bother to elaborate precisely how such movements supposedly “grew out of certain sorts of Sufi teaching and practices”. He makes it all sound -- this is, after all, the implication of the term “grew out of”-- like an organic process of development in which the practices and teachings of these “popular religious movements” were natural continuations of “Sufi teaching and practices”, rather than illicit attempts to try to graft on teachings, practices, and values that were not indigenous to the Sufi path.

The author does qualify things somewhat when he adds: “Whether or not the members of these movements considered themselves Sufis, opponents of Sufism were happy to claim that their excesses represented Sufism’s true nature (again, all of this is far too vague and removed from evidential considerations -- a few specific examples would have helped a great deal). However, this qualification is problematic on several counts.

First of all, the issue is quite independent of “whether or not the members of these movements considered themselves Sufis”. People can

consider themselves whatever they like, but this does not make them Sufi, nor authorized members of a Sufi path.

The author's entire discussion at this point is so lacking in specificity that one has no means by which to differentiate fact from fiction. Everything being said is expressed in generalities of an unsubstantiated and undocumented nature.

The author claims that "opponents of Sufism were happy to claim that their [i.e., the religious movements in question] excesses represented Sufism's true nature" irrespective of "whether or not the members of these movements considered themselves Sufis", thereby giving the impression that these "opponents of Sufism" were quite willing to run fast and loose with the truth if it suited their purposes to do so. This kind of innuendo is no more acceptable than were the previously cited innuendoes associated with the Sufi path -- and, for many of the same reasons -- lack of facts, evidence, documentation and specificity.

In addition, there is another source of potential confusion created in the minds of unwitting readers because of an implicit allegation inherent in the author's foregoing statement. More precisely, the author leaves open the possibility that there were, in fact, some members of these "popular religious movements" who called, or considered, themselves Sufi and who, nevertheless, were 'guilty' of various kinds of "excesses" - - the very excesses with which various opponents of the Sufi path were concerned.

However, since we don't know to what kind of "excesses" the author allegedly is alluding, or, whether, in fact, the people who called themselves Sufi were actually members of some authentic Sufi Order, or even if, at some point, those individuals had been initiated into such an Order whether or not, subsequently, they had experienced the misfortune of going astray from the path, therefore, one really has no way to sort the whole mess out. All one has is a bunch of generalities, allegations, and an artificially constructed link of association between the two.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "Sufi teachers themselves frequently criticized false Sufis..." The author has a footnote connected to this section in which he mentions one individual -- 'Abd al-Wahhab -- an Egyptian living in the period of the early Ottoman Empire (post-1300 A.D.), who wrote some criticisms of "popular Sufism".

While one of the functions of a footnote is to cite material that supports the point one is trying to make, as well as provides a reference point for those who wish to study the matter further, in truth, few people -- especially those for whom a book like *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is intended -- are ever likely to bother to pursue such a 'lead'. After all, the primary audience for this sort of book does not, for the most part, consist of scholars.

As a result, the general reader -- even if she or he bothered to take the time to even read the footnote (which, itself, is questionable) -- still is left without any idea of who 'Abd al-Wahhab was, or what it is that he wrote, or the accuracy of what was written, or against whom the writing was directed. Furthermore, one has difficulty understanding how -- footnote or not -- anyone can take one individual -- namely, the aforementioned 'Abd al-Wahhab, and derive the adverb "frequently" from a single footnote reference as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* has done in the quote given earlier.

The author continues on with: "and the dangers connected with loss of contact with the living core of Islam could only increase when much of Sufism became institutionalized through the Sufi orders." Although this issue of the supposed 'institutionalization' of the Sufi tradition by means of various Orders was touched on in a previous commentary, a few additional remarks are warranted.

What, exactly, is this process of institutionalization to which the author is referring? On a number of occasions, he has introduced the concept of 'institution', and, in the process, he made critical allegations concerning the Sufi Orders as an institution, but we are never given a definition or characterization or explanation of what he has in mind when using this word in conjunction with Sufi Orders.

Moreover, even if one were to concede, for the purposes of discussion, that Sufi Orders were some sort of institution, one still is left in the dark by the author as to just how being an institution increases the likelihood of loss of contact with the living core of Islam. There are all kinds of institutions, and there are all kinds of institutional structures.

Some institutions are functional and others are dysfunctional. Why automatically assume that if a given Order was, at some point, institutionalized, it must have been dysfunctional and, therefore, necessarily, would have led to loss of contact with the "living core of Islam"?

Finally, the author has said “when much (my emphasis) of Sufism became institutionalized through the Sufi Orders.” However, absolutely no evidence is offered by the author to justify his use of the word “much” -- even if we did understand what he means by the notion of institution or how this term applies to Sufi Orders ... which we don't.



41 - Nisbath and Niyat

Page 23 - Chapter Two: "If, as the great Sufi teachers maintain, Sufism is essentially Islam's living heart, those who study specific historical phenomena have the problem of how to judge the degree to which these phenomena deserve the name. The Sufi teachers typically hold that criteria for authentic Sufism are found in correct activity and correct understanding, and these pertain to the very definition of the religion. In other words, Sufism has to be judged in terms of its adherence to the Koran, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the ulama', or in terms of its ability to actualize the fullness of *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*."

Commentary 41: While one could agree with the author that "those who study specific historical phenomena have the problem of how to judge the degree to which these phenomena deserve the name," one might not agree with several presuppositions that are implicit in his assertion. For example, the author seems to be assuming that "those who study specific historical phenomena" -- such as events that might be related to the Sufi path, are qualified to make judgments about what and what does not "deserve the name" of 'Sufi'.

Unfortunately, most of the people "who study specific historical phenomena" are academics, or those who have been trained by academics, and in the case of the Sufi path, most of these academics are like authors of travel brochures who describe places to which they have never been. Now, lots of people might read these brochures and might even be influenced by what these documents have to say, but such 'works' hardly constitute a qualification for passing judgment on what does, or does not, "deserve the name" Sufi.

In addition, the author appears to be assuming that the Sufi path is, primarily, an "historical" phenomenon. Although, to be sure, there are footprints left behind in the sands of history by those who have journeyed along the Sufi path, the actual path is really not a historical phenomenon for it concerns a Reality that predates history and which will continue long after history passes away.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "The Sufi teachers typically hold that criteria for authentic Sufism are found in correct activity and correct understanding." What the author asserts here is quite incorrect.

The quintessential dimension of the Sufi path is the 'nisbath', or spiritual relationship, that exists between a teacher and a seeker -- a relationship that is enveloped by, and rooted in, a chain of spiritual transmission extending back through the shaykhs of a given silsilah to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and through the Prophet, to the entire Prophetic tradition, and, ultimately, of course, Divinity. From a certain perspective, a given 'activity' or a given 'understanding' might be said to be 'correct' reflections of various facets of the Sufi path, but unless such 'activity' and 'understanding' occurs within the context of nisbath, then, spiritually speaking, it is neither here nor there since all mystical realization takes place through nisbath and not through activity and understanding -- in fact, correct activity and understanding are the fruits of nisbath rather than the cause of the latter.

Nisbath involves (for both teacher and seeker ) trust, confidence, faith, sincerity, compassion, love, kindness, himma (spiritual aspiration), submission, openness, honesty, respect, and so many other spiritual qualities. What is correct and appropriate depends on such things as circumstances, capacity, stage, and intention, but judgments concerning 'correctness' or 'appropriateness' can only be made from within the framework of the nisbath that is at the heart of the Sufi path.

There is a tradition about the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in which he came to know about a member of the Muslim community who had killed one of the opposing forces during a battle. The Prophet sent for the man, and when the man came, the Prophet asked him whether he had, in fact, killed the man.

The man confirmed that he had, and, then, he was asked about the circumstances surrounding the incident. The man related that there came a point during the fight in which he gained the advantage over his adversary and was about to run the other individual through with a sword, when his adversary said: 'I testify that there is no reality but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' The Muslim relating this account, then, indicated he proceeded to kill the adversary.

Upon hearing this, the Prophet asked the man why he had killed the individual when the latter had said Shahadah (i.e., the basic attestation of submission). The man replied that he felt his adversary was only trying to save his life and didn't really mean what he had said.

The Prophet rebuked the actions of the Muslim by asking him if he could see into the heart of the man that had said Shahadah and whom the Muslim

had killed. The Prophet proceeded to repeat the same question twice more.

Like the Muslim who had made the foregoing mistake, no one -- least of all, those who "study specific historical phenomena" -- is in a position to assess and evaluate the spiritual currents within the heart of another human being except those who have been given the authority to do so. Furthermore, even with respect to those in whom such responsibility has been vested, they are not in the judgment business but are interested only in finding ways to help the individual seeker to realize the purpose of life.

Shafi'i (150-204 H./767-820 A.D.), who established one of the five major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (and, in fact, was the first to do so), once said of a great Sufi mystic: "He fasts and prays more than any person I know, but, sometimes, he says things which I do not understand."

The fasting and praying were activities that came from correct understanding and to that the great jurist could relate. However, the utterances of the Sufi saint that were problematic for Shafi'i came from the depths of a spiritual nisbath that the jurist could not fathom.

Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "the very definition of the religion" -- or, more accurately, Deen -- is not, 'correct' activity or understanding, but 'niyat' or intention. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: 'Allah does not look at your forms and possessions, rather Allah looks at your hearts and deeds.' The Prophet also is reported to have said: "There is an organ within your body, and if that is healthy, the whole body is healthy, but if that is diseased, the whole body is diseased, and that is your heart.'

Deeds spring from the intentions of the heart. If the heart is corrupt, then, so too, will be the intentions that arise out of that heart as well as the actions that follow upon intentions.

In fact, as indicated previously, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) talked about people who fasted but derived nothing but hunger and thirst, and about individuals who prayed the whole night but derived nothing but wakefulness. Again, as noted earlier, the Prophet said that the prayer of the unaware heart was not accepted by God.

Prayer and fasting are 'correct' activities, and the performance of them arises out of -- at least, in part -- a 'correct' understanding. Clearly, however, the foregoing words of the Prophet strongly indicate there is something more fundamental than correct activity and understanding. This 'something more' goes to the heart of Deen.

Within the Sufi tradition, *niyat*, or intention, is an expression of *nisbath*. As *nisbath* develops, strengthens, and deepens, *niyat* becomes purified, and with a purer *niyat*, comes, God willing, a better quality of activity and understanding.

When 'Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) was on his way to kill the Prophet, he did not perform ablution -- a correct action -- in order to become Muslim. His *niyat* already had changed, by the Grace of Allah, when he was told by his sister to perform ritual ablution, and it was this transformation in his *nisbath* with Allah that enabled him to perform the correct action, and, in turn, this led to a series of actions culminating in his formal declaration to become Muslim.

No one can take a step in the direction of God without God first taking a step in the direction of the individual -- "No soul can believe except by the Will of Allah, and He will place doubt (obscurity) on those who will not understand." (10:100) How receptive one's sphere of intentionality is to this Divine step is another matter.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* concludes this section by maintaining that: "In other words, Sufism has to be judged in terms of its adherence to the Koran, the Sunnah, and the consensus of the *ulama'*, or in terms of its ability to actualize the fullness of *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*." This is the sort of statement that Shakespeare might have had in mind when he wrote: "... full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

More specifically, since that which is entailed by "adherence" to the Qur'an and Sunnah is the issue in question, the author has stated nothing more than a circular argument upon which everyone can agree. Yes, adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah is fundamental to establishing authenticity, but what constitutes adherence?

He speaks of the "ability to actualize the fullness of *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*" as a sort of indicator of whether, or not, something called 'Sufism' is to be judged authentic, and, therefore, presumably, something that adheres to the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, one has the same problem with the

word “fullness” as one had with “adherence” -- namely, what, really, is meant or entailed by either of these terms?

The foregoing is not an exercise in sophistry. The author has failed to establish clear, consistent lines of demarcation concerning the issues he wishes to address.

The author does mention “consensus of the ulama’ as an important source of guidelines, along with the Qur’an and Sunnah. Here, again, however, there is a potential problem.

Ulama’ is the plural of ‘alim. An ‘alim is one who possesses ‘ilm or knowledge, so ulama’ is the community of knowers.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “There are 71 sects among Jews, and only one of them is correct. There are 72 sects among Christians, and only one of them is correct. There are 73 sects among Muslims, and only one of them is correct.” Elsewhere, the Prophet is reported to have said: “The learned masters are the inheritors of the Prophets” and, presumably, the groups that are correct among the Jews, Christians, and Muslims are instances of the “learned masters” to whom the Prophet alluded.

Finally, the Prophet is reported to have said: ‘Verily, God does not take away knowledge from the hands of Divine servants, but removes knowledge by taking away the learned, so that when no learned people remain, the ignorant will be placed at the head of affairs. Causes will be submitted to their decisions, and they will pass sentence without knowledge, and will err themselves, and lead others into error.’

Who can be said to be a rightful member of the ulama’ today? There are many people who have information, but there are a rapidly diminishing number who have real knowledge.

When those of true knowledge reach consensus, the result is of value. When those who are ignorant reach consensus, the result is, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) indicated: ‘... they will pass sentence without knowledge, and will err themselves, and lead others into error.’

The word ‘Ulama’, like the words ‘adherence’ and ‘fullness’ are problematic. By employing these words, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* appears as if he is saying something “full of sound and fury”, but, in reality, is ‘signifying nothing’ at all.



42 - Silsilah

Page 23 - Chapter Two: “Like other branches of Islamic learning and praxis, Sufism is passed on to disciples from a master, who is typically called a ‘shaykh’ (literally, ‘old man’, ‘elder’). The shaykh’s oral teachings give life to the articles of faith, and without his transmission the methodical practice of dhikr is considered invalid if not dangerous. As with Hadith, transmission is traced back through a chain of authorities (called silsilah) to the Prophet.”

Commentary: In truth, the manner through which the essential knowledge of the Sufi path is passed on is not “like other branches of Islamic learning and praxis”. All other facets of leaning and praxis within the Muslim community are pursued by means of a combination of discursive, linguistic, and cognitive processes, whereas in the Sufi tradition, the essential knowledge, is conveyed from heart to heart -- quite independently of discursive, linguistic, and cognitive processes.

While the author is correct that the “shaykh’s oral teachings give life to the articles of faith”, as well as many other facets of Islam, the discourses, explanations, and narratives that are given by a Sufi shaykh are only the most outward form of the teachings. Like the Qur’an, the teachings of a Sufi shaykh might begin with words, but these words are actually portals that, ultimately, are capable, God willing, of transporting an individual beyond the realm of language, and, similarly, like the Qur’an, the Origin of the knowledge to which the words of the shaykh point and allude is of an uncreated nature.

Anyone who supposes the Qur’an can be reduced down to a linguistic phenomenon does not understand the nature of Revelation. Anyone who believes the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) can be reduced down to history, Hadith and Sunnah -- as important as these might be – does not fully appreciate the spiritual significance of the Prophet with respect to the purpose of Creation. And, anyone who thinks that a Sufi shaykh’s way of communicate knowledge can be reduced down, and equated with, the way in which “other branches of Islamic learning and praxis” communicate with students, fails to understand something of fundamental importance about the nature of the Sufi path.

The knowledge to which the shaykhs invite seekers is the same as the knowledge to which the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) invite seekers. However, while all three of these pathways to

knowledge are sacred, the Qur'an is Revelation, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a Prophet, while the shaykhs are not Prophets, nor are their discourses revelation -- although everything that is taught by an authentic Sufi shaykh both reflects, as well as is imbued with, the teachings and qualities of both the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, without a Sufi shaykh's "transmission the methodical practice of dhikr is considered invalid if not dangerous." Simply stated, the author's foregoing contention is not true.

Although the author does not specify who is of the opinion that "the methodical practice of dhikr is considered invalid if not dangerous" if not transmitted through a shaykh, no authentic Sufi teacher would ever hold such an opinion. The Qur'an is replete with encouragements and reminders concerning dhikr, and there are many Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) that speak about dhikr.

These calls and invitations to remembrance are intended for everyone. They are not meant for just people on the Sufi path, and Sufi shaykhs are not the keepers of the gate with respect to whom can and cannot say dhikr, nor have legitimate Sufi shaykhs ever represented themselves as such.

In the Qur'an, one finds: "If anyone forsakes the remembrance of the Most Gracious, We appoint for that person a devil, to be an intimate companion and who will hinder that person from the path. Yet, they think they are being guided in the right direction. (46:36 -37).

The warning that is being given is general in nature. 'Everyone' and 'anyone' is being addressed, and 'everyone' and 'anyone' is in need of 'remembrance of the Most Gracious'-- both Sufi and non-Sufi.

Notwithstanding the foregoing comments, nevertheless, once an individual has taken initiation into a Sufi silsilah, then, part of the adab or spiritual etiquette of the path is for an initiate to seek permission from her or his spiritual guide either to begin reciting various kinds of dhikrs, or to ask the shaykh for a dhikr that would be appropriate for the seeker to do. A shaykh knows better than the seeker about the spiritual condition, circumstances, needs, and problems of such an initiate, and, therefore, would, by the Grace of God, have better insight into which dhikrs are best suited to the seeker's spiritual situation.

Furthermore, there are dhikrs involving jalali Attributes of Divinity that could prove to be difficult for a given initiate. After all, when one invokes a certain Name of God, one is asking for God to engage the individual through the qualities of that Name, and not every individual has the necessary faith, strength, courage, or capacity to be able to withstand the Presence of a Name that gives expression to some quality, or other, of jalal that is being invoked.

Even with the support and help of the shaykh, such engagements can be very difficult to go through. Consequently, on the Sufi path discretion is the better part of valor and this means that before undertaking certain dhikrs, an initiate needs the permission of the shaykh in order to ensure that whatever form of remembrance an initiate is seeking to practice will serve the best spiritual interests of such a person.

On the Sufi path, dhikrs are never performed in isolation by an individual. In other words, a dhikr is not just a methodological form that is given, and once given, that is the end of the matter.

While the initiate to whom the dhikr is given must make efforts to follow the instructions that are given by the shaykh in relation to that dhikr, the seeker's saying of the dhikr is said in the context of the shaykh's spiritual himma or aspiration for the seeker. In effect, the himma of the seeker is joined with the himma of the shaykh, and both are embedded in, as well as are reflections of, the Divine Himmah for the teacher and the initiate.

The Sufis maintain that, God willing, this sort of spiritual 'joint venture' tends to work more to the advantage of the individual than if a dhikr is pursued independently of such a context. To be sure, invoking the Names of God always has, God willing, a constructive effect on an individual irrespective of whether, or not, the dhikr is said under the guidance of a shaykh, but there are some ways that, if God wishes, work more to the benefit of the one who remembers than do other ways.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "All Muslims are like the component parts of a foundation, each strengthening the other. In such a way must they support each other."

By the Grace of God, Sufi shaykhs excel in not only lending this kind of spiritual support and strength to others, but in helping, as well, to teach individuals how to go about establishing themselves to be able to offer, God willing, similar support and strength to still others in the community. In fact,

the spiritual development that occurs, if God wishes, through the guidance and assistance of a shaykh in conjunction with the practice of dhikr is a very good example of the aforementioned Hadith of the Prophet in action.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* asserts that: "As with Hadith, transmission is traced back through a chain of authorities (called silsilah) to the Prophet." As it stands, this statement is somewhat misleading.

The chain of transmission of any given Hadith is referred to as an 'isnad', not a silsilah, and an isnad is based, primarily, on verbal reports from reliable sources. These sources need not be authorities of any kind, but they must be honest individuals of unquestionable moral character and integrity whose reports concerning what someone had said could be trusted as being accurate and, therefore, reliable.

A Sufi silsilah, on the other hand, consists of a chain of spiritual transmission that is not, primarily, based on verbal reports, and the very presence of this chain lends authority and reliability to those -- i.e., the shaykh -- who are invested with the responsibility of being a locus of manifestation for giving expression to the transmission. This transmission soars on the wings of the nisbath that links any current shaykh with all those shaykhs who have come before in a given spiritual lineage and, ultimately, culminating with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The soundness of the isnad of a Hadith depends entirely on methodological considerations. That is, there are a variety of criteria that have been established by certain scholars in order to try to distinguish between, on the one hand, those reports attributed to, or about, the Prophet that are likely to be true and, and on the other hand, those reports that are not likely to be true.

The authenticity of a silsilah is not, primarily, a function of methodological considerations -- although, naturally, these have a role to play in different facets of the teachings of the silsilah. Instead, the authenticity of a silsilah rests entirely with whether, or not, Allah, through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), has sanctioned the chain of spiritual transmission in relation to that silsilah.

In short, with respect to the realm of Hadith, the soundness of a verbal or written report is only as strong as the underlying methodology is capable of demonstrating. In the realm of a silsilah, a given

spiritual methodology is only as sound as the presence of Divine sanctioning permits.



### 43- Initiation

Page 23 - Chapter Two: "The typical rite of initiation is modeled on the handclasp known as *bay'atar-ñdwan* ("the oath-taking of God's good pleasure") that the Prophet took from his Companions at Hudaybiyya (referred to in Koran 48:10 and 48:18). The rite is understood to transmit an invisible spiritual force or blessing (baraka) that opens up the disciple's soul to transformation."

Commentary: A full English rendering of Surah 48, ayat 10 of the Qur'an is as follows: "Surely those who swear allegiance to you do but swear allegiance to Allah; the hand of Allah is above their hands. Therefore, whoever breaks (his covenant), breaks it only to the injury of one's own soul, and whoever fulfills the covenant with Allah, Allah will grant that person a mighty reward." Surah 48, ayat 18 indicates: "Certainly Allah was well pleased with the believers when they swore allegiance to you under the tree, and Allah knew what was in their hearts, so Allah sent down tranquility and rewarded them with a near victory."

The process of pledging allegiance or taking ba'yat or becoming initiated does confer, God willing, a barakah or blessing, but, contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, this Grace has a visible, as well as an invisible, component. Moreover, the blessing is both conditional, as well as, unconditional.

More specifically, ba'yat offers individuals the blessing of opportunity ... the blessing of a door being opened to them. Opening a door of opportunity is not necessarily the same thing as opening "up the disciple's soul to transformation" -- although the former, God willing, can lead to the latter.

The willingness of the shaykh, by God's leave, to extend the opportunity of initiation to a seeker is one aspect of the visible dimension of the barakah that is present when an individual steps onto the Sufi path. Another facet of the visibility of the blessings being conferred in association with the oath of allegiance is in the seeker's awareness of himself of herself as a seeker.

In other words, the inclination to become initiated is a visible sign of barakah -- at least, to the individual who wishes to become initiated -- which is experienced prior to, but, nonetheless, is part and parcel of the blessing of initiation. Indeed, in truth, this inclination of the seeker marks the actual start of the process of ba'yat, and the ceremony of initiation -- if there

is one -- marks the termination of an event that began with the original inclination.

One part of the invisible dimension of the blessing that is transmitted through initiation is not only the gift of 'tranquility' mentioned in 48:18 cited above, but the 'near victory' as well. Yet, these were given to those whose hearts contained that with which Allah was pleased in relation to, at a minimum, their oaths of allegiance.

Consequently, there are conditions inherent in the opportunity that is being given through the taking of ba'yat. For instance, as was indicated in the Quranic ayat, 48:18, an individual's heart must resonate with the right sort of regard for the process of initiation -- a regard that Allah might find pleasing and, in turn, reciprocate by means of, among other things, the gift of 'tranquility' and the 'near victory'.

Furthermore, the Quranic ayat, 48:10, given above, stipulates that the individual must keep the conditions of the covenant. If the person taking initiation breaks the covenant, then, he or she does so to the individual's own detriment, and if a person abides by the requirements of the covenant, then, there is an immense reward that Allah has promised.

There is another part of the claim of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* -- that the blessing of initiation "opens up the disciple's soul to transformation" -- which should be addressed. Like the portion of that assertion that was discussed above, this other aspect of the claim is also incorrect.

More specifically, the soul's potential for transformation exists quite apart from initiation. After all, 'fitra', or the primordial spiritual capacity of a human being, has such a potential hard-wired, so to speak, into it.

Ba'yat, or initiation, is an invitation to that dimension of Deen, or the spiritual journey, which, God willing, is able to realize the capacity of fitra through which the soul, by God's leave, is realized. But, as stated previously, what actually will occur with respect to such an invitation depends, in an important way, on the extent to which a seeker engages the spiritual opportunity that is being opened to her or him.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Take advantage of a good opportunity when the door opens, for you never know when it will close again." For some individuals, the door of opportunity is kept open, by the Grace of Allah, through the presence of a

sincerity and nisbath that grows out of the event of initiation, while, unfortunately, for others, the door of spiritual opportunity closes due to an absence of sincerity and nisbath in such individuals -- qualities whose absence is an indication of a breaking of the original covenant.



#### 44 - Character Traits

Page 23 - Chapter Two: “The master’s fundamental concern - as in other forms of Islamic learning - is to shape the character (khuluq) of the disciple so that it conforms to the prophetic model.

“If modeling the character of students and disciples was a universal concern of Islamic learning, the Sufis developed a science of human nature that had no parallels in jurisprudence or Kalam, though the philosophers knew something similar. So central was shaping character to the Sufi path that Ibn Arabi could define Sufism as ‘assuming the character traits of God’. God created human beings in His own image, and they accepted to carry the Trust, so it is their duty to actualize the divine character traits that are latent in their souls. They cannot do so without the help of teachers who know exactly what these traits are and how to bring them into the open.”

Commentary: Contrary to the contention of the author of Sufism: A Short Introduction, a Sufi shaykh’s primary concern is not “to shape the character (khuluq) of the disciple so that it conforms to the prophetic model”. This is so for several reasons.

First of all, in a very important sense, no one but a Prophet can conform to the Prophetic model. The task of an individual who steps onto the Sufi path is not to become a Prophet. Instead, the spiritual challenge facing a seeker is to become what, in essence, he or she has the capacity to be.

One does this by following the guidance that is given through the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). For the Sufis, the fullest, as well as most accurate and intimate manner of coming to understand the true nature of the guidance transmitted through the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is through those who have a proper nisbath of taqwa, or piety, with the Qur’an and the Prophet.

The Qur’an enjoins believers to choose those people to lead worship who are best in taqwa or piety. On one level this refers to ritual, obligatory prayers, but, in truth, it extends to every level of life, for the Prophet is reported to have said: “Pray without ceasing”, and one needs someone who is capable of leading one to this continuous way of worship, both within and beyond obligatory prayers, until it embraces every facet of existence.

For Sufis, the shaykh is a paradigm of taqwa because, by the Grace of Allah, she or he, gives expression to an engaging blend of love, sincerity, respect, reverence, gratitude, commitment, knowledge, and integrity with

respect to Allah, the Qur'an, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that serves as a perfect modality of transmission for, God willing, instilling in others the same kind of taqwa. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "No person has believed perfectly until one wishes for others what one wishes for oneself," and a Sufi shaykh is someone who wishes for others to be brought into intimacy with the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and Divinity in either the same way the shaykh has, or, if God wishes, in even a better manner.

A second reason why the primary concern of a shaykh is not "to shape the character of the disciple" is because a shaykh approaches the teacher-seeker relationship much like one who did sculptures has once been said to approach the process of producing a sculpture -- namely, one sees a form beneath the surface and proceeds to take away everything that doesn't belong. In other words, the shaykh does not so much shape character as much as he or she works, God willing, toward helping to remove those features that are preventing the underlying Divine form from shining through in an unencumbered way.

The author cites Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) as saying that the Sufi path is a matter of "assuming the character traits of God". This is not accomplished by changing and shaping human qualities so that they become Divine ones, but by creating conditions capable of giving expression to the Presence of the Divine character traits whenever, and in whatever manner, the latter are chosen by Allah to be manifested through the fitra, or primordial spiritual capacity, of the individual.

Fitra will always be what it is. The job of a Sufi is to get out of the way so that fitra, God willing, can give actualized expression to its potential.

In the Qur'an, one finds: "The Real has come and the unreal has vanished away. Lo! Falsehood is ever bound to vanish."(17:81) One also finds: "Everything is perishing away except His Face."(28:88)

When the false self becomes absent, then, the potential of fitra, which constitutes the Presence of the Real, can become manifest. Furthermore, realized fitra is one facet of the Face of the Hidden Treasure through which Divinity desires to be known.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, the duty of Sufis is "to actualize the divine character traits that are latent in their souls."

Strictly speaking, actualizing “divine character traits” is not within the power of a human being. Only Divinity can actualize such traits.

The duty of a Sufi -- and it is a duty that requires a great deal of assistance, God willing, from the shaykh in order for it to be fulfilled -- is to struggle toward a willingness to sacrifice the inessential for the sake of the essential. As long as the false self remains on the premises, the essential Self will not take up occupancy, so the former must leave -- permanently -- if the latter tenant is to move in and become manifest.

Purification of the soul is not about changing the soul or shaping it. Rather, on the one hand, purification is about removing that which interferes with the proper functioning of the soul, and, on the other hand, purification is about redirecting the focus of *niyat* away from the false self and toward the essential Self.

In fact, when, by the Grace of God, the focus of *niyat* is redeployed or re-calibrated so that it serves the essential Self rather than the false self, then, *himma*, or spiritual aspiration, begins to arise in a form that, God willing, is capable of, among other things, jettisoning whatever is considered to be an obstruction to the emergence of the essential Self. However, this process of redeploying *niyat* is not equivalent to Ibn al-'Arabi's “assuming the character traits of God”.

The redeployment or re-calibration of *niyat* is a necessary precondition for “assuming the character traits of God.” The former process is sort of like sweeping off the front stoop and putting out a welcome mat before vacating the premises.

When *ba'yat*, or the oath of allegiance, is sincere, the individual is pledging to struggle to change the *qibla*, or direction of worship, with respect to *niyat* -- that is, the ‘object’ of one's affection. We live in our *niyat*, or intentionality, and when, by the Grace of Allah (which is being transmitted to the individual through the *silsilah* in the form of the shaykh), the direction of worship is changed away from the false self and toward the essential Self, then, the dimension of our being to which expression is given, changes as well.

When the *himma*, or spiritual aspiration, of the *nisbath* of our intention with respect to Divinity reaches a point where we prefer the Presence of Divinity to the presence of the false self and the world, then, a threshold has been reached for “assuming the character traits of God”. This is when, God willing, the deepest, most essential dimension of *fitra*, or primordial

spiritual potential, begins to emerge -- not because we have actualized this potential but because we no longer have an adversarial relationship with that which is Divine within us and, therefore, do not constitute an obstacle to the manifestation of the Divine Treasure via the unveiled capacity of fitra.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that “the Sufis developed a science of human nature that had no parallels in jurisprudence or Kalam, though the philosophers knew something similar.” He does not say what this “something similar” is that allegedly was known by the philosophers, and, furthermore, one has difficulty understanding how the “science [my emphasis] of human nature” that, supposedly, was developed by the Sufis is somehow ‘similar’ to the purely philosophical.

In any event, the Sufis did not ‘develop’ a science of human nature. This science is inherent in the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The nature of this science -- both in terms of knowledge and realization -- is only transmitted from heart to heart via the umbilical cord of a nisbath that, through the process of purification, is capable of resonating in harmony with the essence of what is being taught. To learn this science, one must become the science.

The author does add that Sufis cannot actualize the character traits of God “without the help of teachers who know exactly what these traits are and how to bring them into the open.” Once again, however, what the author is asserting is not quite correct.

The character traits of Divinity are infinite in nature. Consequently, one cannot say, as the author does, that teachers “know exactly [my emphasis] what these traits are”.

A teacher knows the character traits of God in accordance with the spiritual capacity of the individual’s fitra, and, as well, by virtue of what the Divine generosity permits with respect to unveiling. We cannot know that which we do not have the capacity to know, and we cannot know that which is not disclosed to us by Divinity even if we were to have the requisite capacity for knowing such things.

Moreover, a Sufi guide doesn’t necessarily so much know how to bring the Divine character traits into the open, as much as the teacher knows how to assist the individual to struggle with all the things that are getting in the

way of the character traits being unveiled. The teacher helps the individual to establish conditions that are conducive to unveiling, but the unveiling itself comes through Divine discretion -- even though this discretion, if and when it is exercised, might be manifested through the 'gaze' of the shaykh in relation to the one being unveiled..

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* indicates that "assuming the character traits of God" is central to the Sufi path, but one never gets a clear sense from his book of why this is important. Undoubtedly, the righteousness, good conduct, and proper adab that is made possible through "assuming the character traits of God" is of value, both to the individual and the surrounding community, but this realm of activity is derivative and, therefore, secondary to the primary purpose underlying why Sufi shaykhs, such as ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him), give emphasis to the process of "assuming the character traits of God".

In the Qur'an, one finds the following verses: "What is there after the Real, save error?" (10:32). "What is with you comes to an end, but what is with God remains." (16:96) "I have not created human beings nor jinn except that they may worship Me." (51: -56-57) "With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He." (6:59) "Only those who possess the kernels remember." (39:9)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Whoever knows Allah curbs one's tongue from speaking about Allah, since this kind of knowledge cannot be contained in speech." The Prophet is also reported to have said: "Only God's Attributes are fit to praise His Essence."

Humankind, along with jinn, and, indeed, all of creation, have been given manifested being in order to worship Divinity. That worship is best which gives expression to the deepest, most intimate knowledge of God, for not only is the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reported to have said: "Should the day come when I increase not in knowledge wherewith to draw nearer to God, then, let the dawn of that day be accursed", but, as previously indicated, a Hadith Qudsi states: "I [i.e., God] was a Hidden Treasure and desired to be known, so I brought forth creation."

For God to be worshiped purely all sources of distortion must be removed, and this condition is realized when the Attributes of God are present to manifest the Real without interference from that which constitutes 'error'. Moreover, that form of worship which is lasting and "remains" is what is with

God, as opposed to that which is with us but “comes to an end” -- and what ‘remains’ abides by means of the Divine Attributes.

Furthermore, the knowledge of God that is ineffable -- and to which the aforementioned Hadith of the Prophet, concerning the curbing of one’s tongue, alluded -- is rooted in the Attributes of Divinity. In addition, the ‘kernels’ of true remembrance mentioned in the Quranic ayat cited earlier are contained in the Attributes of Divinity.

As well, the keys to the Unseen that give expression to the Hidden Treasure, and which none knows but God, are inherent in the Attributes of Divinity. Finally, as a Hadith given above noted, the most fitting praise - and, therefore, worship - of Allah only can take place by means of the Attributes of Divinity.

If we are to fulfill the purpose of our coming into created being -- not only with respect to knowing the Hidden Treasure, but, also, by putting this knowledge into action in the form of worship that is God’s right -- then, we must strive toward “assuming the character traits of God”, for these encompass the essential kernels of knowledge that are given expression through a sincere, pure worship of God. The potential for realizing these Divine character traits within us is inherent in fitra - our primordial spiritual capacity, and it was to this realized potential within Adam (peace be upon him) -- a realization that occurred when Allah blew of His Spirit into the essential being of Adam (peace be upon him) -- that the angels and Iblis were commanded to fall prostrate.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* asserts that one of the primary tasks of a Sufi shaykh is “to shape the character (khuluq) of the disciple so that it conforms to the prophetic model.” However, he never specifies what the nature of that model is.

There are many Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) concerning the importance of ‘character traits’. For example, the Prophet is reported to have said: “I have been given all the Names and have been sent to bring to fruition good character.” In another tradition, the Prophet was asked which part of faith is most excellent, and he is reported to have responded: “A beautiful character.” In, yet, another Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported to have said: “The best thing in the Scale on the Day Judgment will be a beautiful character.”

The juxtaposition of “Names” and “good character” in the first Hadith noted above is not coincidental. The bringing to fruition of “good character” -- for which the Prophet was sent by God -- is the ‘beautiful character’ about which the Prophet spoke in a number of traditions such as those cited previously.

Moreover, ‘beautiful character’ is a reflection of the Divine Names that had been given to the Prophet and that were to be both the means through which the transformation of ‘good character’ to ‘beautiful character’ took place, as well as the goal of the transformational process. When ‘good character’ has been purified and polished through association with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), it becomes a mirror capable of reflecting the beautiful Names of God.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Allah has 300 attributes, and the individual who acquires just one of these will inherit paradise.” If the acquisition of just one Divine attribute results in paradise, then, what would be the result of acquiring, God willing, more than one?

In fact, the goal of the Sufi path is to acquire as many of these attributes as God allows and spiritual capacity permits. For, through the acquisition of these attributes, one is opened up to witnessing --and, thereby, knowing -- the Hidden Treasure, and this was the *niyat* of the Divine *Himma* or aspiration for creation.

One ‘acquires’ a character trait of God when one’s being is a proper surface for reflecting that trait. One ‘acquires’ a Divine character trait when one becomes a locus of manifestation for that trait, and this only is possible when all that stands in the way of proper reflection or manifestation has been removed by virtue of the process of purification that was at the heart of the mission for which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had been sent and for which he had been given all the Names.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* follows up on his discussion of the importance of character traits by claiming: “This concern to bring out the soul’s innate divine qualities helps explain the great attention that Sufi teachers devote to the ‘stations’ (*maqamat*) of ascent on the path to God and the ‘states’ (*ahwal*) or psychological and spiritual transformations that travelers undergo in their attempt to pass through the stations.” While, from time to time, Sufi shaykhs do speak of ‘states’ and ‘stations’, nevertheless,

to maintain, as the author does in the above quote, that they give “great attention” to such topics is quite misleading, and there are a variety of reasons for this.

Before exploring some of these reasons, however, there are several qualifiers that need to be pointed out in conjunction with the author’s foregoing quote. For instance, although terms such as ‘path’, ‘journey’, ‘way’, ‘ascent’, ‘traveling’, and so on, are used, on a regular basis, to describe the process that an initiated seeker undertakes in order to fulfill the purpose of life, this is not really a “path to [my emphasis] God”.

Divinity is always, and everywhere, present. One does not ‘journey to’ that which already is present, and, consequently, one needs to keep in mind that this manner of talking about things is really just a figure of speech.

In truth, the spiritual or mystical journey is one of an ever-deepening awareness and realization of God’s nearness. At any given time, we might be distant from such a realization, and, therefore, it might seem as if we are traveling to some location that is removed from us in space and time, but this illusion merely gives expression to the veils that blind us to the Divine Presence.

At various junctures in the Qur’an, one finds verses like: “He is with you wherever you are.” (57:4) “We are closer to him than his jugular vein.” (50:16) “... and know that Allah comes between a man and his heart.” (8:24) “Where so ever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (2:115)

All of the foregoing Quranic verses are quite clear that God is ‘here’, not ‘there’. Even transcendent attributes of Divinity are here, rather than there, but they are inaccessible to us.

A second, preliminary point that needs to be made in relation to the author’s previous quote is that “states” are not “psychological and spiritual transformations that travelers undergo in their attempt to pass through the stations.” This disavowal has several aspects.

Although all states are experiential in nature, these states are spiritual conditions and not psychological ones. A spiritual condition is not a function of, nor does it give expression to: biology, brain -states, anomalous synaptic processes, fluctuations in the levels of neurotransmitters or neuropeptides, cognition, and so on -- although any, or all, of the latter

might be correlated with, and, possibly, ensue from, an on-going spiritual condition.

In addition, a spiritual state is not a transformation. It is a transitory condition that marks a certain kind of ephemeral unveiling -- such as an insight, flash of intuition, vision, or some other kind of phenomenological event that takes up temporary lodging in the consciousness of the individual.

Such states could have a modulating effect on intention, aspiration, understanding, or conduct, but the state is more like a visit from a friend that leaves its mark on us than it is like a transformation. Whatever ramifications arise as a result of this sort of visit, the visitor -- that is, the state -- eventually leaves ... and, usually, sooner rather than later.

Furthermore, a seeker does not necessarily traverse "states" while attempting "to pass through the stations". States are Divine gifts that often are quite independent of issues involving spiritual 'stations'.

In fact, an individual might 'travel' from station to station without ever experiencing a mystical state. Thus, states are not way-stations that mark stages that, ultimately, culminate in one sort of spiritual station or another.

Frequently, spiritual states serve as signs that lend support to the individual in various ways. For example, they might give expression to Divine consolations that help render the difficulties of the quest somewhat easier to bear. Or, states might be God's way of letting the individual know that spiritual progress is being made and not to despair of God's Mercy. Or, states might be a form of Divine guidance. Or, states might be intended to help inspire the individual to struggle more persistently and rigorously.

Notwithstanding the foregoing comments, the Sufi path is not about states. Indeed, shaykhs warn seekers about getting caught up with, longing for, wishing for, or having expectations concerning, spiritual states.

Fulfillment of fitra, or one's primordial spiritual capacity, involves realization of, and abiding in, the Divine Presence. This is not a state, and no sequence or series of states can lead to such a realization.

In the Qur'an one finds: "There are varying grades with Allah, and Allah sees what they do." (3:163) Some shaykhs have attempted to state what some of these grades are, and some of these same shaykhs have differed,

somewhat, with one another, in relation to the order of these grades and/or how such grades are to be characterized.

However, these descriptions and characterizations are not necessarily meant to be cast in stone as universals of the path. Like explorers in the physical world, some spiritual explorers have set down conceptual maps that reflect, to varying degrees, certain aspects of their own travel experience.

Descriptions are given in a spirit of helpfulness so that others might gain a few points of reference that could help to demarcate the lay of the spiritual 'landscape' through which subsequent spiritual explorers might venture. Of course, not all travelers might journey through precisely the same 'landscape' as a predecessor has described, and, as a result, the experiences of later 'explorers' might be different which, in turn, could give rise to another kind of characterization of the spiritual journey.

In truth, spirituality is not a linear process. It is highly non-linear.

Experience is a function of personal history, circumstances, personality, temperament, capacity, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. All of these factors can vary from one individual to another and, consequently, there are many facets of the spiritual journey that are unique to the individual seeker.

To be sure, since we all have bodies, minds, nafs, hearts, spirits, and so on, there will be areas of similarity and overlap from one seeker to the next. Moreover, spiritual themes such as repentance, longing, gratitude, fear, dependence, and love are common to travelers of the Sufi path.

Nonetheless, the foregoing commonalities of the journey frequently are engaged in ways that -- to borrow a term from Wittgenstein -- bear a 'family resemblance' to one another, and, as such, one would have considerable difficulty in reducing down this 'resemblance' to a consistent set of universal factors. The experience that one person has while engaging, and being engaged by, various facets of the path might be quite different from the experiences that give expression to another individual's spiritual journey -- despite the presence of any number of commonalities.

Consequently, in light of the foregoing considerations, most shaykhs probably would not devote a great deal of attention to describing spiritual stations. There are just too many exceptions,

variations, and unique features to make the sort of expenditure of time, to which the author is alluding, worthwhile.

Just as importantly, no shaykh would presume to say how any spiritual journey must go. The path is established by God, and each individual has a God-given, unique potential for traversing that path.

In conjunction with the issue of spiritual stations, a shaykh might give suggestions, possibilities, or considerations on which to reflect or that give expression to the experiences of a certain number of travelers of the path. Ultimately, however, God is the one who lays out the precise, unique character of the path that is to be encountered by any given individual.

If one becomes too insistent on, or rigid with, one's description of the sequence and nature of spiritual stations, this can create difficulties for a seeker. Instead, on the Sufi path, one should become, as has been suggested by a number of shaykhs, like the body that is being cleaned in a ritual manner as it is readied for burial -- namely, one should go in whatever direction the One cleansing the body moves one.

Sufi shaykhs, of course, do devote some time to talking about spiritual stations, but they tend to spend much more time on matters that are pertinent to what is going on here and now, as opposed to what might occur, if God wishes, somewhere down the spiritual road. Therefore, discussions involving: *niyat*, purification, *nisbath*, remembrance, *adab*, observance, service, and submission are of much more immediate concern to a shaykh than is talk of spiritual stations.

Unlike spiritual states, the realization of spiritual stations requires constant effort. Consequently, given that shaykhs are inclined to emphasize matters of priority and practicality, the teachings of the shaykhs constantly remind seekers about the need to struggle and leave the rest to Allah.

If the seeker is sincere and persistent in her, his or their struggles toward realization, God will look after the states and stations. Becoming preoccupied with future possibilities -- whether in the form of states or stations -- is counterproductive to the spiritual needs and requirements of the present.



#### 45 - Reason

Page 24 - Chapter Two: “From the beginnings, Kalam experts attempted to understand Koranic teachings in rational terms with the help of the Greek philosophical heritage. In keeping with the inherent penchant of reason to discern and differentiate, Kalam fastened on all those Koranic verses that assert the transcendence and otherness of God. When faced with verses that assert God’s immanence and presence, Kalam explained them away through forced interpretations (*ta’wil*).

Commentary: One has difficulty understanding precisely what the author means when he maintains that “Kalam experts attempted to understand Koranic teachings in rational terms with the help of the Greek philosophical heritage.” This difficulty is a function of several factors.

To begin with, the adjective “rational” is ambiguous, and people tend to apply it, along with words such as “democratic” and “ethical”, as being synonymous with whatever they might be doing or advocating -- irrespective of whether, or not, there is a legitimate equivalency between, for instance, what is truly ‘rational’ and what they are saying. Just as what is referred to as “common sense” is not as common as some people might suppose to be the case, so too, that which is referred to as “rational” is sometimes difficult to find.

Another source of ambiguity within the author’s foregoing quote revolves around the fact that “Greek philosophical heritage” covers a lot of ground and is not unidimensional. Democritus, Zeno of Elea and the Eleatic school, Zeno, founder of the Stoic school, Heraclitus, the Sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle -- to name but a few, all had very different approaches to the use of reason as a means of probing and attempting to understand the nature of experience.

Consequently, in view of such diversity, one does not know what kind of “help” the Kalam experts derived from the “Greek philosophical heritage”. In addition, one has no idea of how, or to what extent, these experts might have modified this ‘help’ to serve their own purposes.

Furthermore, reason consists of something more than an “inherent penchant” to “discern and differentiate”. In fact, one might say that it was the capacity of reason to travel in so many different directions that led to a variety of philosophical schools arising in different parts of Greece over the 500 year period that constituted its golden period of thought.

Hypothesizing, questioning, logical analysis, modeling, ethical judgment, dialogue, the development of rational systems, reflection, and so on, were all used by the early Greek philosophers. Yet, various philosophers employed these tools of rationality in different ways depending on their circumstances, interests, ideas, purposes, inclinations, and abilities.

All philosophy -- which originally meant the love of, and search for, wisdom -- begins with a presupposition. More specifically, philosophy is predicated on the assumption that wisdom can be ascertained and realized through the use of rational faculties.

The Qur'an and Hadith are replete with teachings that call into question the fundamental starting point of philosophy -- namely, that everything can be understood through the use of reason. Consequently, to the extent that the "Kalam experts" relied on reason -- with or without the "help of the Greek philosophical heritage" -- their project was bound to be seriously flawed.

For example, one finds in the Qur'an many verses such as the following: "No soul can believe except by the Will of Allah, and He will place doubt (or obscurity) on those who will not understand." (10:100) "And they ask you about the spirit. Say: The spirit is one of the commands of my Lord, and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little." (17:85) "It is not their sight that is blinded, rather the hearts within their breasts." (22:46) "Or, (the unbeliever's state) is like utter darkness in the deep sea: there covers it a wave above which is another wave, above which is a cloud, (layers of) utter darkness one above another; when he holds out his hand, he is almost unable to see it; and to whomsoever Allah does not give light, he has no light." (24:40)

Unless belief and understanding come "by the will of Allah", then, one will be left in a state of doubt and obscurity. No amount of reasoning will be able to generate faith or understanding.

If reasoning alone were sufficient, there would have been no need for 124,000 Prophets to be sent to humankind, nor would there have been any need for various Books of Revelation to have been disclosed. If reasoning alone were sufficient, all one would have to do -- and, this is what the philosophers and proponents of Kalam believed -- is to focus reason on issues such as: identity, purpose, God, existence, or truth, and wisdom would bubble to the surface.

Yet, again and again, in the Qur'an, Divinity is stating that: faith, understanding, knowledge, sight, and light come from God and no one else. Reason that is not supported by Divinity or illuminated by the light of God is utter darkness.

Reason, unaided by Divinity, supposes that it can storm the gates of wisdom and, through the sheer brilliance of its capacity, force its way into the inner sanctum of truth. Reason assumes that it can work its way to the heart of Reality merely by engaging the surface of experience.

However, Divinity clearly indicates--through both the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), that such a project is doomed to failure. Unfortunately, it is not the capacity for discernment and differentiation, among other things, that is blind in rationalists -- whether these be philosophers or Kalam experts. It is, rather, "the hearts within their breasts" that are blind because it is unlit by the Divine light of faith.

Spiritual truth must be understood through its inner, essential nature. It cannot be penetrated from without.

God must permit realization of the truth. Reason, by itself, is useless.

Reason must be informed by spiritual insight, understanding and wisdom. Reason can neither generate spiritual insight, understanding, or wisdom, nor can the former inform the latter -- it is always the other way around.

Many academics are a lot like the Greek philosophers and Kalam experts. When evidence, experience, facts, and the truth do not comply with their rational frameworks, then, more often than not, they try to force fit things to fit the framework rather than adapt their frameworks to reflect the nature of reality.

Contrary to the impression created by the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Kalam experts did not flounder just with respect to the issues of transcendence and immanence. They ran aground and became derelict at each and every juncture where they gave pre-eminence to reason, in and of itself, over the fundamental importance and centrality of the need for the light of Divinity to illuminate the nature of truth, purpose, identity, and reality.

In effect, those Kalam experts who relied on reason committed shirk or associating partners with God. In other words, for them, there was God and there was reason, and despite what God said in the Qur'an, or despite what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, that was at odds with the

basic presupposition of the rationalist's enterprise, the latter went ahead and established 'reason' as the ultimate arbiter of truth.

The Kalam experts forgot that the Qur'an encouraged people to "Put all your trust in God" (5:23) rather than reason. This does not mean that reason should be discarded, but, instead, reminds us that "To God belongs the conclusive argument," (6:149) and, therefore, reason is answerable to Divinity, not vice versa.

46 - Balance

Page 24 - Chapter Two: “For the most part, Kalam stresses those divine names that assert God’s severity, grandeur, distance, and aloofness. Although many early expressions of Sufism went along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam, another strand of Sufi thinking gradually gained strength and became predominant by the eleventh or twelfth century. This perspective focused on divine attributes that speak of nearness, sameness, similarity, concern, compassion, and love. The Sufi teachers emphasized the personal dimensions of the divine - human relationship, agreeing with the Kalam authorities that God was distant, but adding that His simultaneous nearness is more real than His distance. God is always present and the perception of His absence will eventually disappear.”

Commentary: The author has committed a number of errors in the foregoing quote. For instance, he is wrong to suppose that “many early expressions of Sufism went along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam.” This certainly was not the case in relation to the emphasis that Kalam authorities gave to the importance of ‘rationality’ as the key to understanding the Qur’an, in particular, or Islam, in general.

While Sufi writers, of course, do employ various modalities of logic, analysis, demonstration, proof, and so on, during their expositions of this or that topic, these rational tools are at the service of an underlying understanding. In other words, these devices of rationality are being used as a way of pointing toward truths that must be realized through modalities of apprehension other than reason.

Secondly, Sufi shaykhs did not go “along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam” when it came to the Names and Attributes of God. There are 99 Names of Allah to which reference is made in the Qur’an, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has spoken about God’s 300 Attributes or Character Traits, and, of these, some of them are jamali (having to do with qualities such as peace, beneficence, compassion, love, forgiveness, etc.), and some are jalali (having to do with qualities of rigor, anger, transcendence, severity, independence, judgment, and so on).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “The right and the left are both ways of error, and the straight path is the middle way.” To emphasize jamali Attributes while de - emphasizing jalali

Attributes, would be just as incorrect as when one lends stress to jalali Attributes while relegating jamali Attributes to the background.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said: “If the believer’s fear and hope were to be weighed, they would balance.” In other words, the straight path lies in not only having proper respect for the existence of the jalali Attributes toward which one’s fears are directed, but also to remember the existence of the jamali Attributes around which one’s hopes circumambulate.

Although the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* refers to “many early expressions of Sufism” that allegedly “went along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam”, he offers nothing to substantiate his claim. Indeed, how could any authentic Sufi shaykh go “along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam” that invited people to have a rationalistic, as well as an unbalanced, approach to the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)?

Even if one were to grant, for the purposes of discussion, that some early Sufi writers might have spoken, at length, about the jalali side of things, one need not suppose this was because they were going “along with the dominant attitudes in Kalam”. For example, this sort of emphasis might have been given in order to counteract a tendency in some seekers to stop struggling or making efforts due to an unwarranted complacency in relation to the jamali Attributes of Divinity.

Alternatively, some Sufi writers might have given extra emphasis to the jalali side of the equation because they had been opened up to the jamali dimension of Divinity by paying close attention to the former. Moreover, if the curriculum of some Sufi shaykhs stressed the importance of jalali Attributes as a means of realizing jamali Attributes, then, this is a methodological strategy and not an ontological statement.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* also is incorrect when he discusses those later Sufi shaykhs and writers who supposedly “emphasized the personal dimensions of the divine-human relationship agreeing with the Kalam authorities that God was distant but adding that His simultaneous nearness is more real than His distance. God is always present and the perception of His absence will eventually disappear.”

‘Transcendence’ is not a synonym for either ‘distant’ or ‘distance’. The ‘transcendent’ is that which is so superior, exalted, and/or

incomparable that such a realm is inaccessible to all but the Transcendent.

Furthermore, since the Qur'an, which Sufis consider to be the uncreated Word of God, describes Divinity in terms that are both transcendent and immanent, then, why would any authentic Sufi shaykh try to maintain that "His simultaneous nearness is more real than His distance"? -- surely, both transcendence and immanence are manifestations of the Real.

In addition, contrary to the impression given in the previous quote by the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, transcendence is not absence. Transcendence is Presence of a particular kind.

Transcendence does not disappear. It remains what it always is, but as such, it eludes our awareness. The Qur'an verifies this point when it states: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things." (6:103)



#### 47 - Imagination

Pages 24 and 25 - Chapter Two: “If Kalam and jurisprudence depended on reason to establish categories and distinctions, the Sufis depended on another faculty of the soul to bridge gaps and make connections. Many of them called this faculty ‘imagination’ (*khayal*). For them, it is the innate ability of the soul to perceive the presence of God in all things - a presence indicated by the verse, “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115). They found a reference to imagination’s power in the Prophet’s definition of *ihsan* - “It is to worship God *as if* you see Him.” Through methodical concentration on the face of God as revealed in the Koran, the sufis strengthen the ‘as if’ with the aim of reaching the stage of ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*), which is the generic term for suprarational vision of God’s presence in the world and the soul. Ibn Arabi asserts that unveiling is a mode of knowledge superior to reason, but he also insists that reason provides the indispensable checks and balances without which it is impossible to differentiate among divine, angelic, psychic, and satanic inrushes of imaginal knowledge.”

Commentary: There are three modalities of ‘imagination’. One mode is experienced by the vast majority, if not all, of humanity during periods of creativity, fantasy, day dreaming, planning for the future, and similar cognitive activities.

A second kind of imagination involves the ‘imaginal’ that marks a certain level of metaphysical (that is, beyond the physical) reality and is experienced by far fewer individuals than is the first kind of imagination. This mode of imagination involves a capacity to ‘perceive’ and/or apprehend and/or resonate with different levels of metaphysical reality

The third modality of imagination is Divine in nature. In fact, the first two species of imagination mentioned above are expressions or reflections, of a very limited sort -- the first mode being far, far more limited than the second modality -- of various dimensions of Divine Imagination.

Creation – that is, the bringing forth of the universe – constitutes an exercise in Divine Imagination. Everything that exists in one created world, or another, is the manifestation of an idea that is generated through the Imagination of God.

Although the first mode of imagination -- the one with which most of us are familiar -- does have a capacity to explore various possibilities concerning

different facets of both physical, as well as, psychological worlds, this first kind of imagination is a creator of 'fictions'. It invents, combines, and re-works different sets of scenarios, story lines, and images -- some of which are constructive, some of which are problematic, and some of which are neither one nor the other.

The second kind of imagination alluded to above -- the one involving the spiritual realm, is not a producer of 'fictions', nor is it involved in inventing, re-combining, or re-working different ideas, images, and so on. Instead, this second modality of imagination has the capacity to grasp and experience, God willing, various dimensions of the metaphysical realm.

Just as one needs eyes with which to see the material world, so too, one requires a means of 'seeing' metaphysical realities, and the faculty of 'imagination' in the second, aforementioned sense, encompasses a variety of ways of seeing different parts and levels of the metaphysical realm. In fact, the heart, sirr (mystery), ruh (spirit), kafi (hidden), and aqfah (most hidden) all constitute different modalities of 'seeing' that collectively give expression to the second kind of imagination.

There is another distinction to be noted with respect to a fundamental difference between the first two kinds of imagination outlined above. More specifically, the first kind of imagination -- the species that involves creativity, fantasy, story-telling, model-building, and contingency planning -- is used by many individuals to feed a desire to be God-like ... to be a creator of 'worlds', standards, values, purposes, and so on.

However, whenever the lower-order variety of imagination is employed in the foregoing manner, the individual is committing shirk or seeking to set up partners with God. In other words, the individual sees himself or herself as not only the source -- rather than, at best, a locus of manifestation -- of creative endeavors, but believes, as well, that such a capacity carries a responsibility to invent new forms of Deen, or new systems of thought that are intended to improve upon, or replace, the methods, purposes, and way that God already has established through the original process of Creation.

Actually, such 'creativity' tends to be little more than a process of selecting bits and pieces drawn from different phenomenological currents arising out of dunya (the network of emotional and conceptual entanglements from which much of everyday 'worlds' are constructed), Satanic realms, and the machinations of nafsi amaara (the rebellious self), and, then, combining and

re-combining these currents to generate various conceptual and psychic interpretations concerning the nature of life. In fact, the Prophet is reported to have said: "This world is maintained in existence by illusion", and the kind of lower -order imagination discussed above is one of the primary sources of illusion through which we maintain the existence of that to which we refer as the 'world' or 'reality'.

Metaphysical imagination is the complete opposite of the first kind of imagination. Instead of trying to re-invent the 'wheel', metaphysical imagination seeks to grasp the nature of those dimensions of Divine Imagination that are accessible -- at least, potentially -- to human beings.

To borrow a phrase from the hermeneutical literature, Sufis seek to merge horizons with the Divine Names and Attributes. They do not wish to use the faculty of metaphysical imagination to create something anew but, rather, as a means of gaining access to the cornucopia of spiritual knowledge that will enable them, God willing, to realize the potential of fitra, or primordial spiritual capacity, and, thereby, give expression to the purpose for which Creation was brought forth.

Contrary to the contention made by the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Sufis do not use this capacity of imagination "to bridge gaps and make connections". Rather, this faculty is given expression through spiritual intuition, insight, and other forms of kashf, or unveiling, such that what previously had not been known or encountered becomes available to consciousness and experience in a manner that is rooted in, and is a manifestation of, spiritual knowledge and/or wisdom.

This kind of imagination is not a creation, or an invention, or a flight of fancy, or a reverie, or a day dream, or an hallucination, or the effect of a temporal lobe seizure, or a hypothesis, or a projection, or a logical induction, deduction or abduction. This second species of imagination is an opening up of one, or more, of our internal instruments of spiritual 'vision' and 'sensing' to the realm of spiritual Being.

This mode of imagination is not "the innate ability of the soul to perceive the presence of God in all things", as the author tries to argue in the foregoing quote. Imagination is the set of potentials within fitra, or our primordial spiritual capacity, for witnessing, tasting, perceiving, experiencing, knowing, and understanding an infinitely large array of Divine manifestations.

To be sure, at a certain juncture of the Path, the seeker might come “to perceive the presence of God in all things” through the capacities inherent in the faculty of spiritual imagination. However, before that point is reached, the individual might have any number of flashes of intuition, insights, visions, states, and/or other sorts of unveiling that are expressions of the spiritual imagination at work but which are not, yet, in the form of an abiding awareness, perception, and certainty concerning the presence of God in all things.

Metaphysical imagination involves a spectrum of possibilities that are capable, God willing, of engaging many different facets of the spiritual realm. Indeed, since the spiritual ‘distance’ is substantial between (a) first setting foot on the path and (b) that point when, if God wishes, the individual realizes the fullness of his or her potential, and because there are many ups and downs as well as twists and turns on that path, the seeker needs a faculty that is able to engage a multiplicity of spiritual possibilities and derive constructive value from such encounters to assist that person during different stages of the journey.

If metaphysical imagination were restricted to just perceiving “the presence of God in all things”, then, the seeker would be left wandering in a vast wasteland of unknowing until that faculty was activated. Moreover, in the meantime, this individual would only have reason and the first kind of ‘creative’ imagination as ‘tools’ with which to make sense of the path, together with its concomitant experiences -- and, as indicated previously, neither reason nor the first mode of imagination is capable of handling this sort of challenge.

The author makes the same kind of error a few sentences later when he asserts that *kashf* “is the generic term for suprarational vision of God’s presence in the world and the soul.” As was noted in the foregoing discussion, ‘*kashf*’ is a generic term for ‘unveiling’, and such unveiling can encompass an indefinitely large, if not infinite, set of metaphysical realities.

Not all such instances of *kashf* involve a ‘seeing’ or vision of God’s Presence in all things. At the same time, during *kashf*, whatever spiritual realities are encountered and experienced by an individual do, of course, give expression to the Presence of Divinity through this or that manifest form.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Sufis “found a reference to imagination’s power in the Prophet’s definition of *ihsan* - ‘It is to worship God *as if* you see Him.’ Through methodical concentration on the

face of God as revealed in the Koran, the Sufis strengthen the 'as if' with the aim of reaching the stage of 'unveiling' (*kashf*), which is the generic term for suprarational vision of God's presence in the world and the soul."

There is nothing "as if" about spiritual imagination. When this faculty is operative, one sees, experiences, or is aware of, some dimension of the imaginal or metaphysical realm.

The powerful spiritual experience that was the impetus for Ibn al-'Arabi's (may Allah be pleased with him) writing the multi-volume *Meccan Openings* was not an 'as if' phenomenon. Similarly, his work *The Bezels of Wisdom* was not rooted in an 'as if' approach to experience but involved an unveiling of spiritual reality.

Consequently, at the very least, to say that Sufis "found a reference to imagination's power in the Prophet's definition of *ihsan*" is to confuse the first, 'fiction-oriented', creative modality of imagination with the second, spiritual form of imagination. Moreover, conceivably, such a statement might, itself, be a product of the first sort of imagination -- especially given that the author did not specify that Sufis "found a reference to imagination's power in the Prophet's definition of *ihsan*."

In addition, one is a little mystified about what the author has in mind when he asserts that Sufis "strengthen the 'as if'" part of things through "concentration on the face of God as revealed in the Koran". After all, if imagination is the means by which one perceives the Presence--and, therefore, Face of God-- 'everywhere one looks', then, how does one concentrate on the face of God prior to being able to perceive that Presence?

In short, how does one go from the 'as if' stage of things to the 'Real'? Is it really just a matter of using various techniques of concentration to lend support and strength to the 'as if' aspect of imagination until the Real appears, or is spiritual imagination something quite different from a form of imagination that deals in 'as if', and, therefore, no amount of strengthening the latter sort of imagination will ever culminate in perceiving "the presence of God in all things" or in 'seeing the Face of God everywhere one looks'?

Even in the case of spiritual methods involving concentration of one kind or another, the concentration of an individual by herself or himself is very limited. On the Sufi path, the efforts and struggles of the seeker are done in

the context of -- and, consequently, in conjunction with -- the spiritual himma or aspiration of the silsilah for the seeker that is being manifested through the shaykh's concentration on that individual.

The pathway along which this aspiration is transmitted is the nisbath, or condition of spiritual relationship that links the seeker with the shaykh, as well as the silsilah, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Allah. This relationship is affected by such things as the quality of: intention, sincerity, purity, taqwa, and love within the seeker for the Path and all that is entailed by the journey in question.

The development or enrichment of the relationship of nisbath is not a matter of transforming an 'as if' form of imagination into a mode that is able to see 'the presence of God in all things'. Instead, the maturation of nisbath prepares the individual to be receptive to the awakening or unveiling of spiritual imagination.

The way to this awakening must be cleared through a process of both purifying and calibrating the different modalities of tasting, witnessing, experiencing, sensing, and knowing that comprise the faculty of spiritual imagination. In fact, this process of purification and calibration involves placing restraints on, and circumscribing, the activities of the lower order modality of creative imagination so that what is experienced during spiritual unveiling is unadulterated by fantasies, reveries, projections, and other sorts of 'fictions'.

The characterization of *ihsan* by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) concerns 'spiritual excellence'. The individual who can worship God "as if" she or he could see Divinity but who -- even if that person is not able to attain such a vision -- nonetheless, knows that God sees the individual, then, such a person is demonstrating the quality of *ihsan* or spiritual excellence.

*Ihsan* refers to a condition of 'as if one could see Divinity' and/or it refers to a state of himma, or spiritual aspiration, in which the individual is aware that Divinity can see one during worship. There is nothing here about actually seeing Divinity or fully realizing the Presence of Divinity.

*Ihsan*, like *islam* and *iman*, are important dimensions of Deen, and, consequently, as the Prophet subsequently related to the Companions after Archangel Jibril (Peace be on him) had departed, the stranger who came among them had, indeed, come that day to teach the Companions about

Deen. However, the full realization of *fitra* -- that is, our primordial spiritual capacity -- requires more than compliance with, and observance of: *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not say that *ihsan* constituted the highest, most complete expression of spirituality of which humankind is capable. He was answering questions as they were being asked by Archangel Jibril (Peace be on him), and the Prophet did not disclose more than he was being asked.

On another occasion the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "There are hidden gems of knowledge unknown to all but those who know God. If they are spoken of, none denies them except those arrogant toward God." Furthermore, even when these gems of knowledge are not spoken of -- and, for the most part, the Prophet did not speak of these when the Archangel came to teach the Companions certain aspects of their Deen -- those who deny the existence of such wisdom are still arrogant toward God.

All three of the aforementioned facets of Deen (namely, *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*) do not necessarily require activation of spiritual imagination in order for them to be pursued and observed. That is, someone could be faithful and sincere with respect to her or his: commitment to the five pillars, and bearing witness to the various articles of faith, as well as striving for spiritual excellence, and, yet, still not be able to perceive the Presence of God in all things.

The realization of 'fitra' only can be completed through the activity of the different modalities of spiritual imagination. To be sure, *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan* are important pre-conditions for the realization of *fitra*, but they cannot purify, calibrate, and activate the full potential of: heart, *sirr*, spirit, *kafi*, and *aqfah* that, when activated through various forms of unveiling, are capable, God willing, of perceiving and experiencing the imaginal or spiritual realms.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* notes that while "Ibn Arabi asserts that unveiling is a mode of knowledge superior to reason", nonetheless, the author goes on to claim that Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) "also insists that reason provides the indispensable checks and balances without which it is impossible to differentiate among divine, angelic, psychic, and satanic inrushes of imaginal knowledge." There are a number of problems inherent in the author's foregoing position.

A distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, the currents of phenomenology and, on the other hand, the nature of imaginal knowledge. While the contents of consciousness can be fed from many springs or streams, not all contents of consciousness are instances of imaginal knowledge.

For example, Satanic whisperings, suggestions, temptations, inducements, and so on, are not even a species of knowledge and, certainly, therefore, are not examples of spiritual or imaginal knowledge. Similarly, neither psychic currents, nor the products of low - order, 'fiction-oriented', creative imagination, are instances of the sort of imaginal knowledge that exists within the spiritual realm.

One, of course, can have knowledge concerning the presence and character of satanic whisperings, psychic currents, as well as about the products and images of creative imagination. However, none of these constitute "inrushes of imaginal knowledge".

To be sure, one must learn how to distinguish, say, veridical or true expressions of imaginal knowledge from Satanic or psychic influences.

Nonetheless, this process of differentiation is more a matter of learning how to separate out spiritual wheat (that is, knowledge which arises out of the spiritual realm) from various forms of phenomenological chaff (i.e., influences arising from biological, Satanic, and/or psychic activity), than it is a matter of learning how to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' species of imaginal knowledge.

In addition, while intellect has a role to play in the aforementioned process of differentiation in relation to the contents of phenomenology, the author fails to make clear that this use or application of intellect is not that which might be employed by a logician or someone engaged in philosophical or linguistic analysis. More specifically, separating out instances of imaginal/spiritual knowledge from phenomenological currents arising from Satanic and psychic sources is about developing a sense of 'dhawq' or taste with respect to the 'flavors' of various facets of phenomenology.

Furthermore, one does not become a connoisseur of phenomenological flavors on one's own. One needs to apprentice with an expert -- namely, an authentic shaykh.

One has a dream, and one tells the shaykh. One has an experience, and one tells the shaykh. One has certain thoughts and feelings, and one discusses them with the shaykh.

In response to any, or all, of the disclosures of a seeker, the shaykh will begin to provide information, insight, perspective, corrections, warnings, counsel, and so on concerning the nature of different contents, currents, and influences within an individual's phenomenology. Out of such engagements, the seeker begins to develop an appreciation for the different flavors of experience and how to identify the sources from which these streams of consciousness arise.

Alternatively, the seeker sits in the presence of the shaykh along with other seekers, guests, and the like. During these sessions, the shaykh speaks, interacts, and behaves in ways that provide individuals attending the circle with 'food' for thought and reflection.

These apprenticing sessions establish, among other things, standards of 'tasting' that guide the seeker in the latter's attempt to differentiate and understand the many currents of on-going phenomenology. Eventually, through such sessions, and through other means as well, the individual acquires a facility for dealing with a variety of phenomenological currents.

Consequently, while the process of developing a sense of 'taste' in relation to experience, phenomenology, or consciousness does involve capacities of differentiation, discernment, recognition, understanding, insight and so on, this process is supported through various spiritual faculties or instruments (i.e., the heart, *sirr*, spirit, etc.) of both the shaykh, as well as, those of the seeker. If this were not the case, then, though someone had eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear, nonetheless, the teachings of spiritual apprenticeship would neither be grasped nor would they take root, and, therefore, a sense of spiritual 'taste' would never be acquired.

Some people use the term 'aql' interchangeably with the idea of 'reason', but one needs to understand that 'aql' encompasses a much broader, richer, deeper, and subtler range of possibilities than mere 'reason'. In fact, reason is little more than a very limited, low-order expression of aql.

The source of aql is Divinity. All expressions of aql, on whatever level, are but derivative forms and reflections -- some being more distant than others -- of the original principle of Intellect.

Reason, in and of itself, is not capable of meeting the many challenges of the aforementioned spiritual apprenticeship program -- not even that portion of the program that deals with developing a sense of spiritual taste and discernment. Reason must not only be purified, recalibrated, re-oriented, and re-focused if an individual is to become a connoisseur of phenomenological tastes, but reason must be guided and supported by spiritual knowledge if such reason is to function properly.

Therefore, at a minimum, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is misleading when he states that Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) claimed that "reason provides the indispensable checks and balances" with respect to kashf or spiritual unveiling. Only that kind of reason which is informed by, and rooted in, spiritual knowledge is of any value in assisting an individual to distinguish spiritual knowledge from other kinds of phenomenological current, and the preeminent way in which this kind of reason can be obtained is through an apprenticeship program with an authentic shaykh.

#### 48 - Unity

Page 25 - Chapter Two: "Islam's theological axiom, *tawhid*, declares that God is one, but it also asserts that the world is many. All of Islamic theological thinking addresses the issue of how to correlate multiplicity with unity. Those who look more at the divine side of things place greater stress on unity, and those who look more at the world emphasize multiplicity."

Commentary: Although some Muslims engage in theological activity, Islam is not a theological system. Theology is a man-made enterprise which explores different facets of the conceptual discipline known as 'religion', whereas Islam gives expression to a God-given Deen -- method, way, path, journey process -- that is intended to assist the individual to realize different dimensions of spiritual potential.

People are free, of course, to reject what has been said above concerning the nature of Islam. Nonetheless, if someone -- such as the author of the foregoing quote -- is going to discuss Islam, then, at the very least, that individual should be careful not to conflate conceptual and academic biases with the 'object' being explored.

Consequently, while '*tawhid*' might be a theological axiom from the perspective of, say, an academic, to claim that *tawhid* is "Islam's theological axiom" is to make an assertion that seeks to impose academic values, priorities, and assumptions onto that which is being studied -- in the present case, Islam -- and treating the values, assumptions, and so on, of the former as if they are naturally inherent in the latter. In truth, '*tawhid*' is neither a matter of theology, nor is it an axiom -- that is, a self-evident or universally recognized truth.

Many people pay lip-service to '*tawhid*'. Far fewer people have experienced the reality of *tawhid*.

A person who, in principle, accepts the truth of *tawhid* but who has not experientially realized that truth is not in a position to say such a truth is either self-evident or that the individual 'recognizes' the nature of the truth that, in principle, is being accepted. Furthermore, since very few people know, first hand, the reality of *tawhid*, one cannot say that *tawhid* is a truth that is 'universally' recognized -- even though many people might proceed on the assumption that '*tawhid*' is, in fact, inherent in the nature of 'reality'.

In the foregoing quote, the author states that "Islam's theological axiom ... declares that God is one", and, then, he continues on to claim that the same

theological axiom “asserts that the world is many.” Even if, for the purposes of discussion, one were to allow the author’s way of referring to tawhid as a “theological axiom”, in point of fact, contrary to the contention of the author, tawhid does not simultaneously assert that God is one while the world is many.

Tawhid gives expression to the Oneness of Divinity and nothing else. To the extent we think of the world as many, we have misunderstood both the Oneness of God as well as the nature of the world, for when properly understood, the world is nothing other than a manifestation of God’s Oneness.

It is we -- through our illusions and delusions -- who separate off manifestation from the underlying Source. In the Qur’an, one finds: “You see them looking at you, but they do not see” (7:198), and while, on the surface, this is being said in reference to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), in truth, it refers to all who ‘look’ at the world but “do not see” the Presence or Face of Divinity.

God is One, and the world is one with God. The experience of ‘multiplicity’ is, with one exception, an illusion.

The exception to the foregoing ‘rule’ -- which, actually, proves the rule -- is the experience of those friends of God who go through two varieties of tawhid. In one experiential engagement of tawhid, the person sees Oneness in multiplicity, while in the other experiential modality of tawhid, the individual sees multiplicity in Oneness, but, in truth, each is but the flip side, so to speak, of the One Divine ‘coin’.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, “All of Islamic theological thinking addresses the issue of how to correlate multiplicity with unity. Those who look more at the divine side of things place greater stress on unity, and those who look more at the world emphasize multiplicity.” Now, leaving aside the author’s tendency to confuse Muslim theology with Islam, the task facing theology is not “how to correlate multiplicity with unity” since the process of trying to demonstrate how multiplicity and unity are “mutually” related (which is the nature of correlation) is to set up the issue in a problematic manner.

In other words, to consider ‘multiplicity’ and ‘unity’ as, somehow, being “mutually” related is already to give credence, tacitly, to the idea that multiplicity has a reality that is something other than a manifestation

of Oneness. Tawhid does not encompass any provisions for permitting two things -- namely, multiplicity and unity -- to be related one to another, and all attempts that are dedicated to providing such a 'correlation' will be doomed to failure.

Contrary to the author's way of stating things, there is not a "divine side of things" and a 'world side of things'. There is only Divinity.

Of course, people can engage Reality in any way they wish. Indeed, this is precisely how conceptual systems and interpretations arise -- in other words, people use their lower-order faculty of imagination to invent fictions -- in this case, theology -- which are, then, reified and given existence as 'truth' or 'reality'.

Various Muslim theological thinkers might have addressed, and might continue to address, "the issue of how to correlate multiplicity with unity", but as long as they approach this issue through the lower-order, fiction-oriented faculty of imagination, the issue will never be resolved. The experiential truth of tawhid only can be realized through the unveiling activity of spiritual imagination that seeks to embrace what is Real rather than to try to invent 'reality'.



#### 49 - Similarity

Page 25 - Chapter Two: "The theologians assert that God is utterly 'incomparable' (*tanzih*) with all things in the universe, and the Sufis respond that all things are 'similar' (*tashbih*) to Him, because they derive all their reality from Him. Sometimes the balance between these two standpoints has been broken by a stern and exclusivist legal - mindedness on the one hand or an excessively emotional religiosity on the other."

Commentary: Those who maintain that God is 'incomparable' have a number of problems to solve such as: 'what is the universe', 'how did it come into being', and where does the universe leave off, and Divinity begin, as well as what is meant by Quranic verses such as: "God embraces all things in Mercy and Knowledge" (40:7)? Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Do not curse time, for time is one of the Attributes of God", and, on another occasion, the Prophet also is reported to have said: "Do not curse the wind, for it derives from the Breath of the All-Merciful", and, consequently, if God is completely 'incomparable' with all things in the Universe, then, just what did the Prophet mean by such statements?

Similarly, those who claim that all things are 'similar' to God also are confronted by a variety of challenges that arise out of, among other sources, the Qur'an. For example, there are many references in this Book of Revelation to a variety of Names and Attributes of Divinity that are totally transcendent, unique, independent, and incomparable with respect to anything in the created realm (for example, Kabir - No comparison with anything that is manifest; Wahid - The unique One; the solitary One; the Incomparable; Samad - Absolute independence).

To claim that created things "derive all their reality from" Divinity is one thing. To claim that Divinity is similar to all things because of this relationship of dependence is quite another matter.

In any event, no Sufi, who has any spiritual discernment, would argue as the author suggests is the case in the foregoing quote. More specifically, Sufis do not claim that "all things are 'similar' to Divinity" -- although all things do reflect various dimensions of some of the Divine Names and Attributes, since nothing in creation could exist without the Presence of those Names and Attributes.

Indeed, the 'things' of the world are, in reality, but manifestations of different combinations of Divine Names and Attributes. However, to give expression to a Name or Attribute in manifest form, is not equivalent to saying that all things are similar to Divinity, and, more importantly, it is not the same as saying that Divinity is similar to all things.

All Names and Attributes are made possible by God, but Divinity is more than the sum total of a series of Names and Attributes. Names and Attributes make their appearance only in differentiated reality, and one needs to keep in mind that even while differentiated reality is being manifested, ultimately, the Essence of Divinity is non-manifest.

There is a Hadith Qudsi that states: "In the beginning I was alone." Implicit in this Divine declaration is the fact that the 'beginning' continues on in the present, and, therefore, Divinity is still alone.

In a manner of speaking, Names and Attributes constitute expressions of relationship between Divine Essence and the manifest realms. Where there is no manifestation, there are no relationships between the manifest and the non-manifest, and, consequently, Divine Names and Attributes are not present, per se -- although Divinity remains the One Who is capable of bringing forth such relationships whenever Divinity wishes and, thereby, giving expression to manifest reality.

Divine Essence, as non-manifest Reality, is a 'Reality without a Name ... or Attribute'. We might use the term "Dhat" to allude to the Essence of Divinity, but the term is just a conceptual place holder that, for all practical purposes, is devoid of any meaningful content except as a way of referring to 'that' which is absolutely transcendent, inaccessible and unknowable.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Reflect on all things, but do not reflect on God's Essence." There can be nothing but error that will ensue from trying to reflect on that dimension of the Real that cannot be experienced, known, or conceptualized.

Sufis do not say that the things of the world are similar to Divinity, nor do they argue that Divinity is incomparable. Instead, they submit to the teachings of the Qur'an that confirm that: "Nothing is like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing (42:11).

There are dimensions of similarity, and creation exists by virtue of, and is rooted in, these similarities. Simultaneously, there also are dimensions of incomparability.

The Qur'an states: "And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to help it (were ink), the words of Allah could not be exhausted." (31:27) Divine words belong to the realm of the manifest, and if the ability to record these words is beyond the capacity of the resources of the created world, then, the understanding -- even in the case of spiritual imagination -- completely fails in relation to the non-manifest realm that is beyond "the words of Allah" since Divine words give expression to differentiated reality or manifested existence.

The Qur'an indicates that "God taught Adam all the Names" (2:3 1), and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "I have been given all the Names and have been sent to bring good character to fruition." Just as the angels could not give back to God what God had not vouchsafed to them in the first place (i.e., the Names), so, too, we only can know, if God wishes, the Divine Words, Names or Attributes for which Divinity has given us the capacity to know through our fitra.

Indeed, as Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), a close Companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), is reported to have said: "Even the awareness of our own inability to know Divinity, is, itself, wisdom". A Sufi perspective is one that recognizes the existence of the 'incomparable' dimensions of Divinity that cannot be known even while these unknowable dimensions leave their mark upon us in the way they shape our understanding of ourselves, the universe and our relationship with Divinity. At the same time, a Sufi perspective is one that also recognizes the existence of the 'similar' dimensions of Divinity that can be known, to varying degrees, even as such dimensions never can be exhausted.

While there are theological thinkers who might have given preference to the 'incomparable' standpoint over the 'similar' perspective and vice versa, and while there might have been individuals who tried to settle this matter by adopting either a "stern and exclusivist legal-mindedness on the one hand or an excessively emotional religiosity on the other", none of this has anything to do with the Sufi approach to the issue. In fact, by exploring such irrelevancies, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* lost a valuable opportunity to provide a clear explanation about what Sufis actually hold to be true in this matter.



## 50 - Union

Pages 25 and 26 - Chapter 25: “Many Sufis vigorously asserted God’s omnipresent and immanent oneness and the possibility of union with Him. Others stressed His absolute transcendence and emphasized the duties of servanthood that arise as soon as we distinguish between Creator and creation, Real and unreal, truth and falsehood, right and wrong.”

Commentary: Union with God is not just a ‘possibility’. It is an ongoing reality that most people do not recognize as being present.

Union with God refers to a condition of unveiling in which the individual becomes aware of the truth being expressed through Quranic verses such as: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that God is the Real.” (41:53) Or, “We are closer to man than his own ventricular vein.” (50:16)

Nonetheless, no one who is a legitimate and informed traveler of the Sufi path would discuss the omnipresent nature of Divinity without, sooner or later, providing a parallel, and balancing, context concerning the transcendent nature of God. Unfortunately, the author’s manner of stating things in the foregoing quote leaves one with the impression that there were authentic, aware Sufis who would speak of omnipresence in complete isolation from issues of Divine transcendence.

Of course, when a given individual is under the influence of this or that Divine Name or Attribute, then, everything in that person’s experience tends to be colored by the spiritual hue of the Name(s) or Attribute(s) by which they are dominated at the time. Therefore, utterances -- whether in spoken or written form -- arising from these people during such a period are likely to be preoccupied with just these ‘colors’ and no others ... not because the other colors don’t exist but because consciousness is dyed in certain colors, and this is what will be reflected in understanding, speech and behavior.

However, one cannot take individual experiences that are biased in the direction of this or that Divine Name and try to claim that whatever is said or written during this juncture of the path constitutes an accurate representation of the path as a whole. The Real is not a function of our experience, but, rather, our experience is a function of what the Real discloses to us across time.

The interpretation of such experiences is another matter altogether. Every interpretation will be a function of the stage of the path out of which the interpretation arises.

A number of Sufis have recounted the story about four blind men who encountered an elephant, and each of the blind men came up with a different understanding of the reality being engaged depending on what part of the elephant they touched. Prior to full spiritual arrival and realization, travelers of the mystical path are like so many blind individuals whose understanding of the path is a function of that part that they are touching and by which they are being touched.

A person who sets out on a trip from Los Angeles to Frankfurt, Germany, but who gets off in New York, or London, or Paris, is not in a position to say anything about Frankfurt. All they can relate is something about New York, London, or Paris -- and even that will be limited to their experiences of such places and will not exhaust what there is to know about any of these other cities.

No Sufi of understanding would divorce the issue of Divine transcendence from considerations of Divine immanence. To do so, would distort the teachings of both the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in a fundamental way.

Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, 'servanthood' does not automatically arise, ipso facto, as soon as distinctions concerning "Creator and creature, Real and unreal, truth and falsehood, right and wrong" are introduced. After all, philosophers, theologians, scientists, and lawyers -- among others -- regularly make distinctions about such things, but the existence of these sorts of distinctions does not necessarily lead those individuals to become servants of God.

The author seems to be implying there could be no sense of 'servanthood' that arises out of a realization of being one with Divinity. However, to whatever extent the author is tacitly alluding to this kind of idea, then, he is quite incorrect.

Union with Divinity does not mean one is synonymous with, or equal to, all that Divinity is. Rather, 'union' gives expression to the truth that we are not other than loci of manifestation for Divine Names and Attributes.

One Sufi has characterized the foregoing reality in the following manner. Namely, 'while, in essence, we are Divinity, we are not Divinity in Essence'.

As Divinity has made clear in the Qur'an, the purpose of our existence is to worship God. Those who have realized this experientially, and not just conceptually, aspire to be servants of God.

Worship is to prostrate -- with our whole being -- in sincerity, freedom, love, gratitude, and knowledge (indeed, in every way) before the Friend, the Compassionate, the Generous, and the Forgiving One, as well as with respect to the One Who is transcendent, sublime, beyond our comprehension, independent, and so on. One cannot properly engage worship in relation to either qualities of transcendence and/or immanence without an awareness and understanding of one's status as a servant of Divinity.

Consequently, servanthood does not arise out of distinctions and transcendence per se. Servanthood arises out of an essential realization concerning the nature of our origins, identity, purpose, and spiritual capacity.



51 - Sobriety/Intoxication

Page 26 - Chapter Two: "In order to describe the psychological concomitants of these two standpoints, the Sufis spoke of various pairs of 'states' (*ahwal*) experienced by the travelers on the path to God. One of the most instructive of these is 'intoxication' (*sukr*) and 'sobriety' (*sahw*). Intoxication follows upon being overcome by the presence of God. It designates the joy of the seekers in finding the eternal source of all beauty and love within themselves. The travelers see God in all things and lose the ability to discriminate between Him and creation or to differentiate between correct and incorrect. Intoxication is associated with expansion, hope, and intimacy with God. It is the human response to the divine names that declare God's compassion, love, kindness, beauty, gentleness, and concern.

"In contrast, sobriety allows for a clear differentiation between God and the world and a calm and careful discernment between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. It correlates with the absolute distinction between Creator and creatures and is associated with wonderment, awe, contraction, and fear. It is the human response to divine names that designate God's majesty, glory, splendor, magnificence, might, wrath, and vengeance.

"If perceiving God's aloofness allows for a clear understanding of the difference between servant and Lord, seeing His nearness blinds the discerning powers of reason. Neither standpoint is complete in itself. The vision of things as they truly are demands a balance between seeing God distant and finding Him near, or between rational understanding and imaginal unveiling."

Commentary: 'Intoxication' and 'sobriety' are not "psychological concomitants of" Divine 'Immanence' and 'Transcendence'. 'Intoxication' and 'sobriety' are spiritual conditions, and, in any event, spirituality cannot be reduced down to a set of psychological concomitants.

There is a field of study known as 'trans-personal psychology' that seeks to explore various kinds of religious, spiritual, and/or mystical phenomenology, as well as such things as anomalous experiences induced through breathing techniques, ingestion of substances with hallucinogenic properties, biofeedback processes, meditative practices, sensory deprivation, and so on. Nonetheless, in general, psychology -- both

currently and historically -- tends to try to explain consciousness and its contents as expressions of either biology and/or something called 'mind' and/or what is referred to as the 'soul' or 'psyche', and irrespective of which terminology is adopted, the underlying assumptions of psychology are: (a) all cognitive and emotional states or conditions can be understood through rational methods; (b) ultimately, all psychological phenomena are a function of physical and/or material processes.

When Sufis speak about instruments of understanding such as: 'heart' 'sirr' (mystery), 'ruh' (spirit), 'kafi' (the hidden), and 'aqfah' (the more hidden), they are not referring to processes that are capable of being accessed by reason or rational methodologies. In fact, when the term 'trans-rational' is used in conjunction with such processes, the intention is to stipulate that although mystical states and stations are not irrational in nature, at the same time, these states, stations, conditions, and experiences cannot be subsumed under, or accessed by, this or that modality of rational activity, and, consequently, fall 'beyond' or outside the framework of reason.

Consciousness is capable of being fed by many streams. Psychological processes constitute one set of sources out of that arise some of the contents of consciousness, awareness, or phenomenology. Nevertheless, there are other non-psychological realms that are capable of serving as sources that generate various kinds of content that might surface in awareness, and, furthermore, some of these non - psychological realms are not functions of biological, material, or physical processes.

Of course, there could be different psychological phenomena occurring in response to, say, spiritual experiences. In addition, psychological phenomena might color and filter the manner in which spiritual experiences are understood.

However, despite the possibility of such correlations and interpretive filtering or coloring, the spiritual cannot be reduced to the psychological. Furthermore, the psychological realm does not 'cause' the sort of spiritual phenomena about which the Sufis sometimes speak.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* claims that 'intoxication' and 'sobriety' are 'states' or '*ahwal*'. His claim is in need of correction, qualification and elaboration.

More specifically, on occasion, spiritual 'intoxication' might be given expression through a state -- that is, a transitory, experiential phase of phenomenology. On the other hand, spiritual intoxication can last for a very extended period of time (for which the term 'state' no longer seems appropriate), as well as be a permanent condition.

There are some individuals -- known as 'mathzub' -- who are spiritually intoxicated to varying degrees, and this condition is manifested, in different ways, through their behavior. Depending on the extent of spiritual intoxication, an individual might display just relatively 'mild' forms of intoxicated behavior, or the individual might give expression to the kinds of behavior that are at considerable odds with what is taken to be the normal boundaries of 'proper' or acceptable conduct.

Many Sufi shaykhs are in a permanent condition of spiritual intoxication, but, for the most part, this condition is never disclosed through behavior, or it is never disclosed in a way that the vast majority of people would recognize as being a manifestation of an underlying spiritual intoxication. The reason for this is that such shaykhs conduct themselves in accordance with the adab, or spiritual etiquette, of 'sobriety' which requires that one constrain or mask the presence of spiritual intoxication.

Consequently, 'sobriety' is not a 'state' or 'ahwal'. Instead, 'sobriety' is, in part, a condition that results, God willing, from the exercise of spiritual discipline in which the individual complies with a set of principles that are entailed by the shaykh's insight into what constitutes appropriate behavior under various circumstances.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Surely, your soul has a right against you, your Lord has a right against you; your guest has a right against you, and your spouse has a right against you. So, give to each one who possesses a right against you." Adab is the art of recognizing the 'rights' of all with whom one comes in contact -- directly or indirectly -- and, subsequently, pursuing a course of conduct that honors such rights to the best of one's ability to do so.

With respect to the 'adab of sobriety', one refrains from giving overt expression to an underlying condition of spiritual intoxication. In fact, masters of the Sufi path maintain that spiritual instruction should be given through the adab of sobriety since instruction arising in the absence of such

sobriety easily can be misunderstood by a seeker and, thereby, result in misguidance rather than guidance.

There can be no observance of sobriety if spiritual intoxication is not present. The former presupposes the latter.

Therefore, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is incorrect when, in the earlier quote, he gives the impression there are Sufis who are in a condition of sobriety without, simultaneously, being spiritually intoxicated. While one can be spiritually intoxicated without being 'sober', there is no need to observe the adab of sobriety if one is not experiencing the condition toward which such etiquette is directed.

In the foregoing quote, the author also claims: "Intoxication follows upon being overcome by the presence of God. It designates the joy of the seekers in finding the eternal source of all beauty and love within themselves. The travelers see God in all things and lose the ability to discriminate between Him and creation or to differentiate between correct and incorrect." The above way of stating things is problematic since, among other things, it tends to cut all instances of 'intoxication' from the same cloth, when, in fact, there are many different levels and degrees of intoxication.

Not all conditions of spiritual intoxication necessarily involve seeing 'God in all things', nor does intoxication necessarily involve an awareness of 'the' presence of God--although intoxication is certainly indication of 'a' presence of some Divine manifestation. The following story helps demonstrate this point.

There was a seeker who came rushing to his shaykh in an extreme state of happiness, joy and excitement. The seeker kept exclaiming he had seen God.

When the shaykh queried the individual concerning what had happened, the student talked about the tremendous light he had seen while washing up and preparing for prayers. The shaykh responded with: "You silly fool, all you saw was the nur (spiritual light) of your ritual ablutions."

Now, while the nur of ablution is one expression, among many other possibilities, of the presence of a Name of Divinity, nevertheless, realizing God's presence to the extent that one sees God in all things, as well as all things through God, is a spiritual condition that extends far beyond being witness to this or that manifestation of Divine light. There are many kinds of Divine manifestation that might descend on an individual's consciousness, and any

one of these might trigger a state of intoxication, so while all conditions of intoxication arise from one Source, not all such conditions give expression to the same Divine manifestation.

Consequently, contrary to the contention of the author in the foregoing quote, intoxication need not be restricted to just “finding the eternal source of all beauty and love within” oneself. Intoxication is a condition of unveiling in which some dimension of Divinity is given manifested expression through the consciousness of an individual, and the scope, intensity, richness, subtlety, and so on, of whatever is manifested overcomes the individual.

Intense wonder and awe concerning the majesty, grandeur, and uniqueness of Divinity could induce a condition of intoxication just as easily as realizing the Presence of God’s love and beauty. Indeed, all of the Names and Attributes of Divinity -- either singly or in combination -- are capable of bringing an individual into a condition of ecstasy and intoxication.

Moreover, intoxication is not necessarily a matter of losing “the ability to discriminate between Him and creation”. On the one hand, intoxication is a condition of consciousness, and in such a condition one might not so much lose the ability to distinguish between Creator and creation as be oblivious to all aspects of creation and totally caught up in whatever manifestation is being displayed on the screen of consciousness. On the other hand, the issue of losing one’s ability to discriminate between God and creation is something of a red herring since such discrimination entails the perpetuation of an illusion that is at odds with God’s actual Oneness.

The author also claims in his book that intoxication causes a person to lose the ability to “differentiate between correct and incorrect”. A better way of saying this might be to say that spiritual intoxication expands one’s horizons concerning the question of what might be meant by the ideas of ‘correctness’ and ‘incorrectness’, since the way one engages such issues often is relative to one’s spiritual condition.

There was a shaykh who was sitting with a group of people when a person came into the room and began to complain to the shaykh about some individual with whom the person speaking was having an altercation. The shaykh listened to the individual’s story, and when the latter person had concluded and asked the shaykh whether his side of things was right, the shaykh agreed with the individual and said that the person was right. This individual left, very happy that the shaykh had agreed with him.

A little while later, the person about whom the first person had complained entered the room where the shaykh was sitting and proceeded to lodge his complaint against the first person. Upon hearing this person's side of things, the shaykh agreed with the second individual that the latter person was right. Soon, thereafter, this second man left, very happy that the shaykh had agreed with him.

Following the departure of the second individual, one of the people spoke who had been sitting with the shaykh throughout both stories. This person wanted to know how the shaykh could possibly tell two people that they were both right when their stories were diametrically opposed to one another. The shaykh smiled at this individual and said: "You're right."

Does a person who is intoxicated lose the ability to discriminate between right and wrong or are the lines of demarcation governing rightness and wrongness merely redrawn in the light of the Divine disclosure that is dominating his or her present, spiritual condition? The adab of sobriety comes into play at this juncture for such spiritual etiquette indicates that irrespective of the truths and realities that are being disclosed to an individual through that person's condition of intoxication, nonetheless, the person must govern herself or himself in accordance with the spirit of the previously cited Hadith of the Prophet in which one is counseled to honor the "rights" of whomever, and whatever, that arise out of any given set of circumstances.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "intoxication is associated with expansion, hope, and intimacy with God. It is the human response to the divine names that declare God's compassion, love, kindness, beauty, gentleness, and concern."

Intoxication is not a "human response" to certain Divine Names. The Divine Names are present everywhere and always, but the vast majority of people never experience spiritual intoxication, so intoxication cannot be a human response to such a Presence.

To varying degrees, and on different levels, human beings have a potential for experiencing Divine Names. When God tears away a certain veil, then, the aforementioned potential is activated.

The individual does not respond to the tearing away of the veil with a condition of intoxication. Intoxication is inherent in the removal of the veil, for, in effect, the removal of a veil is just another way of talking about the opening

of a certain dimension of fitra or primordial spiritual capacity -- an opening that is infused with a sense of ecstasy and intoxication as human potential is engaged by Divine possibility.

The author's foregoing assertion is also misleading when it restricts "intimacy with God" only to jamali qualities such as "compassion, love, kindness, beauty, gentleness, and concern". When an individual is engaged by Divinity through jalali qualities such as majesty, justice, constraint, rigor, and so on, the relationship is still one of intimacy although this form of closeness might be more difficult to bear.

In fact, an individual cannot be said to be fully realized until she or he has encountered and/or been embraced by all the Divine Names. Intimacy entails accepting Divinity in all modalities of manifestation and not just those that might appeal to this or that dimension of the individual.

The author attempts to contrast the nature of sobriety with intoxication by asserting that: "sobriety allows for a clear differentiation between God and the world and a calm and careful discernment between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. It correlates with the absolute distinction between Creator and creatures and is associated with wonderment, awe, contraction, and fear. It is the human response to divine names that designate God's majesty, glory, splendor, magnificence, might, wrath, and vengeance." Aside from the already established point concerning the misleading character of the author's use of the phrase "human response" -- whether in relation to jamali or jalali qualities -- there are a number of additional points that need to be made with respect to the above noted quote.

First of all, the adab of sobriety does not so much allow "for a clear differentiation between God and the world", as much as sobriety is rooted in an understanding that understands the 'rights' of different manifestations of Divinity. Those expressions of Divine Names and Attributes that appear through this or that locus of worldly manifestation have certain rights associated with their existence, just as those expressions of Divine Names and Attributes that appear through this or that locus of spiritual manifestation have certain rights associated with their being.

Intoxication is the adab of unveiling. Sobriety is also the adab of unveiling.

In fact, the understanding that comes through the intoxication of unveiling helps inform the understanding of sobriety so that the latter is imbued with a sacred respect for the Presence of Divine manifestation -- a respect which only could arise through the intoxication of unveiling. Similarly, the understanding of sobriety helps inform the condition of intoxication so that the latter is experienced and enjoyed but not permitted to spill over into outward conduct -- at least, in any discernible manner.

Sobriety does not consist in "a calm and careful discernment between right and wrong, beautiful and ugly." Sobriety is not an act of ratiocination in which certain conclusions are deduced from starting premises.

Sobriety is a condition of spiritual insight into various dimensions of truth, beauty, justice, balance, and rigor with the express purpose of reconciling the ecstatic sacredness of unveiling with the 'rights' that are inherent in that same unveiling. This is not a matter of distinguishing between 'right and wrong, beautiful and ugly' but of grasping the nature of the reality that defines the context out of which intoxication and unveiling arise, as well as acting in accordance with one's knowledge of the relationship among different modalities of Divine manifestation.

Furthermore, the perception of something as 'ugly' is not so much an instance of discernment as it is an admission of ignorance. Everything that is in creation serves the purpose of Divinity and, therefore, cannot be anything but expressions of goodness and beauty.

To judge something as ugly is to do so from a perspective that fails to understand how that which is being judged fits into the Divine scheme of things. Ugliness is not part of the adab of intoxication, nor is it part of the adab of sobriety.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* claims that sobriety is "associated with wonderment, awe, contraction, and fear". There are several problems inherent in his claim.

For instance, although those who are in a condition of sobriety have a deep, abiding, essential sense of respect and sacredness concerning all things Divine, the 'fear' that is experienced is not so much directed toward God as it is a reflection of the individual's recognition that human beings have a capacity for transgression, and, consequently, the person of sobriety is worried about his or her own vulnerability to the sort of carelessness and heedlessness that could result in a fall from spiritual Grace ... just as

happened with Iblis despite having been raised up by God to not only associate with the angels but to teach them as well. People of sobriety fear their own capacity to become alienated from Divine guidance.

In addition, sobriety is not a condition of “constriction”. The author is confusing spiritual contraction with the restraints that are part of the adab of sobriety and that set up boundaries of demarcation which should not be transgressed.

Spiritual contraction exists when Divinity imposes a set of conditions on an individual that are designed to corral that person within an existential space dominated by difficulty, hardship, privation, rigor, problems, and challenges. Contraction paves the way for, God willing, eventual expansion, and the former is part of the alchemical tempering process forging spiritual character.

People of sobriety are not necessarily in a condition of spiritual contraction -- although they could be. However, sobriety is not a function of spiritual contraction, nor is contraction automatically inherent in the condition of sobriety.

In fact, for the most part, sobriety constitutes a condition of expansion. This is so because not only is intoxication present in those who are observing the adab of sobriety, but the adab, as well as its observance, are both gifts of God that reflect the individual’s being drawn closer to fulfillment of life’s purpose and being drawn closer in this way is an expression of spiritual expansion, not contraction.

Ironically, in some cases, intoxication actually can give expression to a condition of spiritual contraction. For example, on occasion, an individual might become so enamored with a certain condition of intoxication that they become stuck in such a condition and, as a result, spiritual progress is arrested.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Hell is veiled in delights, and Heaven is veiled in hardships and miseries.” Similarly, sometimes, spiritual contraction is veiled in intoxication and expansion is veiled in sobriety.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: “If perceiving God’s aloofness allows for a clear understanding of the difference between servant and Lord, seeing His nearness blinds the discerning powers of reason. Neither standpoint is complete in itself. The vision of things as they

truly are demands a balance between seeing God distant and finding Him near, or between rational understanding and imaginal unveiling.” There are a number of mistakes of understanding inherent in the foregoing quote.

First of all, the jalali qualities of Divinity such as majesty, justice, wrath, rigor, independence, transcendence, incomparability, and so on, are not expressions of Divine “aloofness”. In fact, precisely the opposite is the case.

Jalal qualities are not somewhere else. They are all here and now, but they are present in a way that we cannot comprehend or penetrate -- except to whatever extent Allah wishes.

For instance, the independence of Divinity refers to, among other things, the fact God is not in need of anything from Creation. God does not need our: prayers, or worship, or love or service.

If, and when, by the Grace of God, an individual comes to realize something of the nature of Divine independence, this realization has a profound impact on modulating the manner in which an individual pursues the purpose of life. God doesn’t need us, but we need God, and whatever we do is to our benefit or harm and cannot enhance, or detract from, Divinity in any way. As the Qur’an indicates: “O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Independent, the Praiseworthy.” (35:15)

The Names and Attributes of Divinity give expression to those aspects of the Hidden Treasure that are disclosed in manifest form. Every facet of manifestation is shaped, colored, oriented, directed and sustained by the collective contributions of the Names and Attributes in accordance with the Divine Himma or aspiration through which Creation was brought into existence.

Where is the aloofness in any of this? If a Name or Attribute were not intended to impact on manifest existence -- especially in relation to humankind and jinn, the Name or Attribute would not be at all, for all Names and Attributes mark the presence of Divinity in Creation according to the modality inherent in a given Name or Attribute that serves the Purpose of Creation.

Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, “nearness” does not blind “the discerning powers of reason.” Nearness expands and informs the “discerning powers of reason.”

A faculty of reason unsupported by the understanding that a realization of 'nearness' to Divinity brings, is but a dim reflection of what reason can and should be. Reason cannot function properly in the absence of 'nearness', for reason becomes dogmatic, rigid, inflexible, narrow, and adrift when it is not nurtured by 'nearness'.

The author continues on by saying: "The vision of things as they truly are demands a balance between seeing God distant and finding Him near, or between rational understanding and imaginal unveiling." In reality, although spiritual balance is of fundamental importance to being opened up to 'things as they truly are', such balance has nothing to do with "seeing God distant and finding Him near" or being "between rational understanding and imaginal unveiling".

Both intoxication and sobriety are expressions of a realization of nearness. Both kinds of 'nearness' are rooted in imaginal unveiling, and the spiritual understanding that arises out of each of these varieties of imaginal unveiling is the source of balance to which the author alludes in his quote -- a balance that involves an optimization of rational functioning (because it is informed by imaginal unveiling) that does not permit reasoning to stray beyond its province of expertise.

Consequently, true rational understanding is a by-product of spiritual balance rather than a component of such balance. Furthermore, true spiritual balance involves seeing God's nearness through qualities of *jamal*, as well as, *jalal*, and there can be no proper balance without the realized nearness of both sets of Divine qualities.



52 - Adab

Pages 26 and 27- Chapter Two: “By and large, drunken Sufis tend to de-emphasize the Sharia and declare union with God openly, whereas sober Sufis observe the courtesy (*adab*) of a servant’s relationships with his Lord. The sober fault the drunk for disregarding the Sunnah, and the drunk fault the sober for forgetting the overriding reality of God’s mercy. Those who, in ibn Arabi’s terms, ‘see with both eyes’ keep reason and unveiling in perfect balance while acknowledging the rights of both sober and drunk.”

Commentary: One wonders about the data base that supposedly backs up the author’s conclusion that, “by and large”, so -called drunken Sufis “de-emphasize the Sharia” and made certain judgments concerning those who are sober, or that ‘sober’ Sufis do this or that while faulting intoxicated Sufis for the latter’s alleged failure to regard the Sunnah of the Prophet. Undoubtedly, some historical instances can be found where a few individual’s might have made statements of one sort or another about the matter.

However, in the absence of specific cases (and the author offers no help in this respect), one is not in a position to know who said what, or what was meant by that which was said, or whether the people speaking were really qualified to address the issue. Moreover, being able to cite a few scattered historical examples is a long way from demonstrating something so sweeping as the phrase: “by and large”.

What evidence is there that “drunken Sufis tend to de -emphasize the Shari’ah? Has the author followed all of these people around and jotted down their errors of omission and commission?

Presumably, all drunken Sufis bear witness that there is no reality but God and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God. Therefore, not only do they not de -emphasize this facet of Shari’ah, but, by the Grace of God, they have had important dimensions of the reality of this pillar of Islam opened up to them.

In addition, since these people are in a state of intoxication, then, to whatever extent such individuals do stay away from ritual prayers, they actually might be acting in compliance with the command of the Qur’an. After all, one cannot assume that the Quranic prohibition against performing prayers while in a state of intoxication pertains only to those are

inebriated through alcohol -- especially since this Divine warning mentions that those who are in such a condition might not be conscious of what they are saying.

If these people who are in a condition of spiritual intoxication are poor, then, they might not be obligated to pay anything in the way of zakat. For the same reason, they might not be in a financial position to go on Hajj or pilgrimage, and, if this is the case, then, the observance of this Pillar of Islam is not incumbent upon them.

As far as fasting is concerned, Allah knows best. However, as was noted earlier--when citing a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- there are many people who fast, and all they derive is hunger and thirst.

Therefore, just because someone complies with the external requirements of obligatory fasting does not mean such an individual has fulfilled the conditions of fasting. Moreover, an individual who is spiritually intoxicated might not be mentally competent, and the obligation to fast pertains only to those who are mentally able to meet the requirements of the fast.

People should be careful about what charges and allegations they bandy about concerning the spiritual observances of other people, and, instead, the former individuals should, perhaps, pay more attention to their own possible short-comings. More importantly, in the light of the allowances that are made within Shari'ah for different conditions and circumstances, one wonders what aspects of Shari'ah supposedly are being 'de-emphasized' by drunken Sufis.

Furthermore, there are many verses of the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which, if one has any humility, should make one pause and wonder where one's life fits into the measure of things when placed upon the Scales of Divine exactitude and evaluation. For instance, consider some of the following possibilities -- which are but a few of the many examples that could be given.

"Shall We tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works? Those whose striving goes astray in the present life while they think they are working good deeds." (18:104) Can anyone be sure that the striving of a Sufi, drunk with spiritual intoxication, will go astray while the deeds of those who are not intoxicated with such unveiling will find favor with God? Is it not

foolhardy to make presumptions about what God will and will not do and about whether or not we are deceived about the “value” of our own deeds?

“Have you seen him who has taken his caprice to be his god, and Allah sends him astray purposely, and seals up his hearing and his heart, and sets on his sight a covering?” (45:23) Is an individual’s resistance to mystical possibilities a sign that they are rightly guided or could it be an indication that a seal has been placed on her or his hearing or heart and that a covering has been placed over the individual’s vision due to the many ways in which the person’s caprice is the god that is served?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “This world is prohibited to the people of the next world, and the next world is forbidden to the people of this world, and both worlds are forbidden to the people of Allah.” If a person’s spiritual ambition is to attain Paradise, then, praise be to God, but those who are inclined in this way should not condemn those who might be in a condition of spiritual intoxication, for among the latter are those who care neither about this world nor the next but only seek the Countenance of their Lord--and these are the ‘people of Allah’ to whom the Prophet alluded in the foregoing Hadith.

Where is the evidence that drunken Sufis do not follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)? People follow the Sunnah in accordance with their capacity to do so, and most people fall far short of perfection with respect to realizing the fullness of Prophetic practice.

The Sunnah of the Prophet includes, among other things, kindness, generosity, selflessness, honesty, compassion, love, sincerity, integrity, courage, steadfastness, patience, gratitude, friendliness, forgiveness, service to others, and many other qualities. Can one automatically assume that people in a condition of spiritual intoxication abandon such things?

Are the people who are in a condition of spiritual intoxication lacking in faith? Do they fail to remember their Lord? -- and, one should keep in mind that God said in the Qur’an: “Lo! Ritual worship preserves an individual from lewdness and iniquity, but, verily, remembrance of Allah is more important.” (29:45)

Are the people of spiritual intoxication lacking in *ihsan*? Are they not very aware that God sees them, and do they not worship God “as if” they could see Him given that every Divine unveiling is a form of “as if” even if such

an unveiling might be something less than full realization of an individual's spiritual capacity?

To mention, as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* does, allegations that drunken Sufis 'de-emphasize the Shari'ah or fail to follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad is merely to regurgitate the charges of various Muslim theologians down through the ages. In addition, like all too many of these theologians, the discussion in the author's book is devoid of any evidence to warrant perpetuating such allegations.

The author clearly is merely passing on what others supposedly have said. Nonetheless, in legal terminology, this constitutes hearsay testimony and calls for conclusions based upon facts that have not, yet, been placed into evidence.

The foregoing problem is not resolved by noting, as the author does, that: "Those who, in ibn Arabi's terms, 'see with both eyes' keep reason and unveiling in perfect balance while acknowledging the rights of both sober and drunk." For, aside from the author's failure to understand what ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) means by 'reason' and the nature of spiritual balance, one is still left with questions -- questions that the author has helped to raise -- such as: do drunken Sufis really de-emphasize the Shari'ah? Have they abandoned the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)? Do drunken and sober Sufis really throw charges and counter - charges back and forth at one another like so many bickering children? Have sober Sufis really forgotten the "overriding reality of God's mercy"?

No useful purpose is served by approaching the issue in this manner. In fact, doing things in this way tends to help create confusion rather than remove it.

53 - Disclosing Secrets

Page 27 - Chapter Two: "... sober expressions of Sufism do not mean that the authors knew nothing of intoxication. There is a higher sort of sobriety that sees everything in its proper place and is achieved *after* intoxication, not before it."

Commentary: All forms of sobriety arise 'after' intoxication and not before encountering the latter. If one has nothing to disclose in the way of spiritual awareness and attendant secrets, then, the practice of sobriety is empty, if not pretentious.

In addition, although there is a form of sobriety in which everything is dealt with in an optimally propitious manner, the adab of sobriety encompasses the principles of engagement, so to speak, with respect to the general condition of spiritual intoxication -- whatever the particular form that might pertain in any given instance. This means that what can be expressed -- in either speech or behavior, as well as the circumstances under which such things can be expressed -- governs the condition of intoxication.

More often than not, when certain Sufis voice reprimands with respect to the manner in which someone's condition of intoxication spills over into the public arena, the objection is not because the condition of intoxication, in and of itself, is wrong or heretical. The concern is over the public disclosure of 'secrets' -- a disclosure that might prove to be problematic for different people within the general Muslim community who could place their own interpretations on the meaning or significance of these sorts of Divine disclosure and, as a result, become misguided about what ramifications someone else's condition of spiritual intoxication has for someone who is not on the path and who does not have access to the counsel of a Sufi shaykh.

The adab of sobriety is a way of protecting spiritual secrets, as well as the general community, as well as the 'reputation' of those who might experience a condition of intoxication. Consequently, for all of these reasons, individuals on the path who become spiritually inebriated are taught to exercise discipline, as much as possible, in relation to such conditions.

At the same time, on some occasions, the force and intensity of the spiritual intoxication might overcome all capacity for discipline. In such cases, one cannot say there has been a failure to observe proper adab by the one undergoing the experience.

Sometimes, for unknown reasons, Divinity wishes for there to be a 'display' of public, spiritual drunkenness. Furthermore, in every part of the world -- both past and present -- there are those who have been singled out by Divinity for just such displays.

The adab of sobriety does not apply to such individuals. These people operate under a different set of Divine principles.

The fact that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* acknowledges that some forms of sobriety (i.e., the "higher sort") follow only upon the experience of intoxication is good even if the way in which he says this is somewhat misleading. However, what would have been even better is if he had mentioned this fact at the very beginning of his discussion on this topic rather than requiring the reader to wade through a lot of unnecessary and confusing hearsay testimony.

#### 54 - Poetry/Prose

Page 27 - Chapter Two: “Drunken expressions of Sufism predominate in poetry that is ideally suited to describe the imaginal realm of unveiled, unitary knowledge. Sober expressions find their natural home in prose, which is perfectly suited for the theological abstractions and logical analyses that are the forte of reason. Sufi poetry constantly celebrates God’s presence, and Sufi prose tends toward systematic exposition of doctrine and practice, always keeping one eye on the opinions of the jurists and the Kalam experts.”

Commentary: Pretty much everything that is said in the foregoing quote is incorrect. What is not incorrect, per se, is in need of qualification, elaboration, and amendment.

Both the poetical and prose expressions of those who are authentic travelers of the Sufi path are rooted in “the imaginal realm of unveiled, unitary knowledge”. This understanding is not the province of authentic mystical poetry alone.

In fact, no one can write insightfully and accurately -- whether through poetry or prose- - about the nature of the Sufi path unless the understanding out of which such writing arises is shaped, colored, and oriented by spiritual realization. The deeper this realization, the more insightful and accurate will be that which is said.

Authentic Sufi poetry and prose each consist of a blend of discipline and insight, form and flexibility. However, the rules and principles governing the exercise of these components differ somewhat in each instance.

Poetry gives emphasis to such things as rhythm, rhyme, allusion, imagery, and metaphor. Prose gives emphasis to qualities such as explanation, detail, structured development, factual accuracy, and didactic coherency.

Mystical poetry invites people to the truth in one way. Although the goal of mystical prose is the same as its poetical counterpart, the former engages individuals in a different manner than does poetry.

However, neither poetry nor prose is capable of doing anything more than pointing to certain dimensions of truth and reality. They are intended to serve as signs of the path, and, consequently, they cannot serve as substitutes for the path.

One can learn from good mystical poetry and prose. Each provides material on which to reflect. Each inspires in its own style.

Nonetheless, each is, more or less, only a report from the 'far country'. To travel, let alone reach one's spiritual destination, one must do more than read or listen to poetry and prose about that 'far-off land'.

Mystical poetry is no better suited to providing access to the realm of imaginal or spiritual understanding than is mystical prose. To properly understand either form of literature, one must participate in the spiritual understanding through which such writing is given expression.

When a spiritually unrealized individual is moved by such writing, there is a tangent of resonance that is established, momentarily. As a result, something of the flavor or fragrance of the imaginal realm is transmitted through the words and ideas being conveyed.

When a person of some spiritual insight is moved by authentic mystical poetry or prose, that individual is brought into contact with a first-person account of a Friend with whom both writer and listener (or reader) have some understanding and experience. The fact such accounts might approach the common Friend from a slightly different direction or introduce a new facet of the Friend's character or personality only serves to add to the enjoyment of the shared reminiscence.

Although prose might be "perfectly suited for the theological abstractions and logical analyses that are the forte of reason", mystical prose has nothing to do with either 'theological abstractions' or the desiccated formalisms of 'logical analysis'. Good mystical prose consists of descriptions, accounts, reports, and discussions concerning the experience of those who have traveled, or are traveling, the path.

The unpacking of experience that takes place in mystical prose is not a function of theology, abstractions, nor logical analysis. This unpacking is a function of insight, realization, and unveiling.

One might have to use various modalities of logic, analysis, and abstraction in order to translate mystical wisdom into a form that has some chance of being understood by those who have little, or no, facility with the 'lingua franca' of the imaginal realm. However, none of this is a matter of the sort of 'theological abstractions' or forms of 'logical analysis' that are employed by either jurists or Kalam experts.

Furthermore, to whatever extent the writers of authentic mystical prose keep an “eye on the opinions of the jurists and the Kalam experts” -- and this might not be as much as the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* might suppose -- the choice of prose or the observance of sobriety has little to do with any decision to keep track of such opinions. More often than not, the opinions of jurists and Kalam experts concerning mysticism is based on an almost complete lack of experience with, or understanding of, the Sufi path, and, therefore, from time to time, certain Sufi writers feel obliged to offer a corrective counter to the misperceptions, incorrect characterizations, and unsupported allegations that, sometimes, populate such opinions.

Finally, the author is wrong when he gives the impression, toward the latter portion of the previously cited quote, that only Sufi poetry “constantly celebrates God’s presence”. Both mystical poetry and prose do this, and how anyone who has spent as much time reading and translating Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) -- as the aforementioned author has -- could arrive at any other conclusion is quite mystifying.



### 55 - Poetical License

Page 27 - Chapter Two: "Poetic license allows the Sufi poets to convey the experience of God's presence with imagery that shocks the conventionally pious and flies in the face of juridical and theological discourse."

Commentary: The author's way of stating things tends to cast mystical poetry in a light which suggests that all mystical poets set out to do is to come up with imagery that will shock "the conventionally pious" and fly "in the face of juridical and theological discourse". While there might be imagery or ideas contained in mystical poetry that pushes the envelope of spiritual expression in ways that some people find upsetting, the fact of the matter is that even if one were to grant the author's point – and this is not as much a slam-dunk as the author appears to suppose -- mystical poetry is so much more than this.

Authentic Sufi poetry inspires, expands horizons, informs, entertains, teaches, reveals, moves, induces reflection, reminds, humbles, mystifies, and, in general, serves as a locus of manifestation for sparks of spirituality to ignite the minds, hearts, and souls of those who read and listen. The rhythms, rhymes, and word-play within such poetry are, in themselves, often mesmerizing -- quite apart from whatever ideas, values, and possibilities are being conveyed.

As far as the issue of "license" is concerned, the question is really a matter of who has taken license with what. One of the functions of true mystical poetry is to try to help people to re-think what they thought they already knew and, in the process, introduce the reader or listener to a different way of looking at, and engaging, Reality.

The views of all too many jurists and theologians tend to be very reductionistic, narrowly conceived, and inflexible. Mystical poetry seeks to remind people that some of the opinions of jurists and theologians have taken license with the truth by eliminating many important themes from consideration.

Another way of saying the same sort of thing is as follows. Authentic mystical poetry gives expression to a perspective that says there are more colors on the palette of Divine Purpose than the hues of black and white with which many jurists and theologians try to paint the canvas of existence.

Various jurists and theologians have tried to exclude certain points of view from being entered into testimony. Moreover, certain jurists and theologians have tried to rig the rules of evidence and discovery so that most, if not all, of the mystical realm is to be ruled to be irrelevant to spiritual matters and, thereby, create obstructions with respect to a 'fair' and impartial hearing being held before the court of public opinion.

Mystical poets are considered controversial by some individuals because the former have had the audacity (or courage) to suggest that, perhaps, it is not mystical poetry that "flies in the face of juridical and theological discourse" but the latter that flies in the face of the essential truths to which poetry seeks to point. Naturally, some jurists and theologians will be upset by this paradigm shift because the venue, nature, focus, methods, and principles governing discussion will be changed dramatically and in a manner that is not necessarily to their 'rhetorical' advantage.

## 56 - Hallaj and Junayd

Page 28 - Chapter Two: “The classic example of the contrast between drunken and sober Sufism is found in the pictures drawn of the tenth century figures Hallaj and Junayd. The first became Sufism’s great martyr because of his open avowal of the mysteries of divine union and his disregard for the niceties of Shariite propriety. The second, known as the ‘master of the whole tribe’ (*shaykh al-la’ifa*), kept coolly sober despite achieving the highest degree of union with God..”

Commentary: Contrary to the author’s contention in the foregoing quote, Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul), the person, did not necessarily openly avow “the mysteries of divine union”. While such words as “Ana’l Haq” (I am the Truth) might have issued from his mouth, the “I” and “Truth”, to which reference is being made through the words of the mystic, is none other than Divinity.

In fact, there are a number of questions that arise in conjunction with the events surrounding the public execution of this Friend of God. Among other things, one needs to ask whether, or not, Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) was any more blameworthy than the burning bush had been for disclosing Divine secrets to Moses (peace be upon him).

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contrasts the spiritually intoxicated condition of al-Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his spirit) with the sobriety of Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul). This choice of individuals is instructive and, perhaps, for reasons other than what the author originally might have intended.

The two mystics were not only historical contemporaries, they knew one another as well. After Hazrat Mansur Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) completed his study of various exoteric disciplines associated with Islam, he turned his attention to the Sufi path, and one of his Sufi teachers was Hazrat Junayd Baghdadi (may Allah sanctify his soul).

The process of unveiling that, ultimately, resulted in the problematic utterances of Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) took place when he was studying with Hazrat ‘Umar ibn ‘Uthman (may Allah sanctify his soul). Despite instructions from this latter teacher to refrain from such exclamations, the same sort of utterances continued on from time to time, and, eventually, the shaykh ordered Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) to leave the vicinity.

Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) left Basra and went to Baghdad where he returned to the spiritual center over which Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) presided and with whom Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) previously had received instructions concerning the Sufi path. Once again, however, there was a spilling over of spiritual intoxication into the public domain through the mouth of Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul).

On one of these occasions, the shaykh warned Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) that, in a very short period of time, the blood of the latter would color the point of a piece of wood -- an allusion to a future date with the executioner. Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) is reported to have responded by acknowledging the truth of what the shaykh was saying but, also, adding that the shaykh would be required to take off the clothes of a Sufi dervish and wear the attire of a religious cleric in relation to the forthcoming demise of Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul).

The unfolding nature of subsequent events demonstrated the truth in the words of both individuals. More specifically, a 'fatwa of kufr', or proclamation of unbelief, was issued by the court of Baghdad against Mansur Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul), and a penalty of death was sought. Eventually, he was imprisoned for about a year while waiting for the final sentence to be declared and carried out.

During his stay in prison, he continued to utter "Ana'l Haq" -- I am the Truth. Yet, throughout all of this period, he observed prayers on a regular basis -- often staying up entire nights to be engaged in prayer.

The head of government in the area refused to carry out the death sentence unless Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) agreed with the charges and the penalty to be imposed. The shaykh was asked to make a pronouncement concerning the matter on seven different occasions.

Finally, the seventh request arrived with instructions that the shaykh must answer either 'yes' or 'no' with respect to the charge and sentence. As Hazrat Mansur Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) foretold, the shaykh removed the attire of the Sufi path, donned the garb of an 'Alim -- a person representing the community of religious scholars, and wrote: "According to the laws of Shari'ah, Mansur is liable to a sentence of death, but according to the doctrines of the Secret Truth, God knows best" -- thereby, setting in motion the execution that would prove the truth of his earlier words to Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul).

Could Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) have done other than he did? He acknowledged the truth of his shaykh's warning that the executioner was waiting for him if he did not stop saying: 'Ana'l Haq', and, yet, he continued to declare the problematic formula.

There is no indication he was disobedient in other matters. For instance, when he was asked by one teacher to leave, he left. When he was in prison, he was devoted to prayer.

Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) avoided the issue for as long as he was able to do so. When he no longer could delay the matter, he issued a statement that, simultaneously, endorsed both sides of the controversy.

He agreed that under the requirements of Shari'ah, or the Divine Law that governed communal life, the one making the utterances in question was liable to a penalty of death. Nonetheless, only God knew if these declarations were wrong from the perspective of the Secret of Truth.

To protect the integrity of community life --including the potential vulnerability of some people who might be misled by such utterances -- the shaykh acknowledged the rights of the community in this matter over that of the individual. At the same time, by making reference to the Secret of Truth, over which God had jurisdiction, as well, he went as far as he could--without following in the verbal footsteps of Mansur Hallaj (may Allah be pleased with him) to indicate that there was, indeed, something more to be considered than the exoteric facets of Islam and that God alone would be the judge of this matter.

The fact that Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) put off making a formal declaration on six previous occasions demonstrates that the issue was neither a simple one nor one that necessarily pointed toward just one conclusion. The fact that the shaykh qualified his public statement concerning the sentence indicates that not only was there more to the issue than just what was entailed by the aspects of Shari'ah governing communal life, but that the shaykh was willing to risk the ire of the religious clerics by reminding people, in a very public way, that a sentence of death did not end the matter.

In the Qur'an one finds, "You will express your desire for death if you are truthful." (62:6) Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah be pleased with him) did, and death smiled upon him.

It is reported, through eyewitness accounts, that upon execution every drop of blood shed by Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) assumed the shape of the Arabic letters that spelled “Ana'l Haq” and, as well, people heard this phrase arising from the blood that had been spilled on the ground. There are further reports that when mud, stained with the blood from the execution, was thrown into the Euphrates, the same phrase was heard arising from the river.

What is the truth of such accounts? As Hazrat Junayd said, ‘Allah knows best’.

What is the contrast between these two friends of God? One observed the adab of sobriety, and one did not.

We do not know whether, or not, Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) was operating under Divine compulsion, or whether he was, for unknown reasons, unwilling or unable to comply with the adab of sobriety. Can he be considered to be something of a ‘burning bush’ of his day such that, like the latter, he really didn’t have any control over what was being manifested through him -- when what was uttered, was uttered?

We do know that Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) -- who did observe the adab of sobriety -- felt comfortable with alluding to the possibility that the acts of the one being condemned might not have been wrong when considered from a Divine perspective rather than a purely human and/or communal one. We also know that from the perspective of Shari’ah anyone paying the prescribed penalty for a transgression of the law is considered to be innocent before God on the Day of Judgment in relation to that transgression.

There is an account of a Sufi shaykh who, during the condition of spiritual intoxication, would say things that appeared to be heretical in nature. When the shaykh came out of that condition, his mureeds, or students, informed him about what had gone on.

Upon hearing the testimony of his mureeds, the shaykh agreed such exclamations were not in accordance with the Shari’ah. He advised them that if he should make such statements during some future instance of intoxication, the students should take their swords and kill him immediately.

A few days later, the shaykh went into a condition of spiritual intoxication and, again, uttered the same sorts of exclamation. The

students proceeded to follow the instructions that, previously, had been given by the shaykh with respect to such circumstances.

They tried to strike the shaykh with their swords. Yet, on each occasion, their swords passed through the shaykh without causing injury or bloodshed.

Is the foregoing account factual? Or, is it merely a piece of embellished folklore? Or, is it a story with truth at its kernel?

For many centuries, due to what some perceive to be the problematic statements issuing from the mouth or pen of this or that Sufi, various jurists, academic scholars, and theologians have been trying to swing their verbal swords through the body of the Sufi path. Yet, like the students of the shaykh in the aforementioned story, their swords have passed through without, for the most part, doing damage or shedding blood.

The adab of sobriety is complied with for a variety of different reasons. Some of this etiquette is observed in order to protect the Secret of Truth to which Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) referred in his aforementioned quote. In addition, the adab also serves to protect both the community, as well as travelers on the Sufi path -- including people such as Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his spirit) if they are able to avail themselves of its protection.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Do not give wisdom to other than the people of wisdom for you will be doing the wisdom an injustice, and do not prevent the people of wisdom from obtaining it and, thereby, do them an injustice."

The Sufi path follows the above mentioned teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and through the adab of sobriety, the path seeks not to do injustice to spiritual wisdom by giving it to those for whom it is not intended. On the other hand, the purpose of the path is to ensure, God willing, that the people for whom wisdom is intended are not prevented from being exposed and opened to that wisdom.

What is the truth concerning the nature of this wisdom? What is the truth of the foregoing story of the intoxicated shaykh and his mureeds? What is the truth concerning what is alleged to have happened following the execution of Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul)? What is the truth behind his uttering "Ana'l Haq?"

Everyone makes his or her own choice about what to believe and what not to believe in relation to such matters. Ultimately, however, “To God belongs the conclusive argument” (6:149), and unless one is acquainted with that argument on a first-hand basis, one might do well to remember the counsel of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): “There are hidden gems of knowledge unknown to all but those who know God. If they are spoken of, none denies them except those arrogant toward God.”

Both Hazrat Hallaj as well as Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify their souls) -- each in his own way -- spoke of these “hidden gems of knowledge” for they each, in their own way, knew God. One of them observed the adab of sobriety with respect to such knowledge, and one of them did not -- although, perhaps, the latter might have been incapable of preventing what was said from being said.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* claims that Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) showed a “disregard for the niceties of Shariite propriety.” However, other than the issue of “Ana’l Haq”, the author has not indicated any other transgressions concerning ‘Shariite’ propriety that were committed by the accused, and since the author has used the plural form of ‘nicety’, he either should have said what the other kinds of disregard were which allegedly was shown by Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul), or he should have specified that the only problematic facet of the latter’s life arose from the aforementioned issue of the controversial utterance -- an utterance that was controversial not because it was untrue but because it was spoken in public.

‘Ana’l Haq’ is, in fact, entailed by, and an expression of, the central meaning of the first pillar of Islam in which one is required to bear witness that there is no reality but Divinity. To say there is no ‘god but God’, does not get to the heart of the matter, for one must ask what is Divinity, and when one addresses this question in essential, fundamental terms, the answer to that inquiry is that God is the basis, and cause, of all manifested possibilities. In short, there is no reality but Divinity, and any statement to the contrary is in error.

All of Creation is nothing but a multiplicity of manifested permutations and combinations of Divine Names and Attributes brought together through Divine Purpose. There is no aspect of Creation whose nature, qualities, character, form, potential, possibilities, capacity, behavior, and duration are not a function of the manner in which Divinity

arranges Names and Attributes in order to give expression to manifestation of one kind, rather than another.

Consequently, if the 'I' of "Ana'l Haq" -- that is, 'I am the Truth' -- is a realized reference to the Divine nature of manifestation -- human or otherwise, and if 'Haq', or Truth, is one of the Names of Divinity -- which it is -- then, in reality, the statement in question is actually an alternative way of stating the very same truth that is contained in the Shahadah ... the declaration that there is no reality but Divinity. Although the public declaration of 'Ana'l Haq' constitutes a violation of Shari'ah -- as understood by various schools of legal hermeneutics -- nonetheless, the statement is only heretical or untruthful when it is said through a human being who is not in a realized spiritual condition of tawhid.

Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) did not say that what Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) uttered was untruthful. He said that according to the requirements of Shari'ah which governed communal life, what had been said constituted a transgression of those exoteric boundaries.

However, the shaykh added a rider -- which was the most he could do and still keep with the adab of sobriety -- that the Secret of Truth was another matter since it fell beyond the framework of the exoteric aspect of Shari'ah. Certainly, if the exoteric facets of Shari'ah were the final, all encompassing word on such matters, there would have been no need for the shaykh to make a statement that had two themes -- one pointing toward the requirements of the exoteric aspect of Shari'ah and one pointing beyond those requirements.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* refers to Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) as a "martyr". Generally speaking, a 'martyr' is considered someone who submits to death rather than renounce certain spiritual commitments.

We all are operating under a sentence of death, and the time at which this sentence will be executed already has been set. We are all slain by Allah because God is the One who arranges the effective causes resulting in our demise -- while we bear the responsibility for the nature of the niyat or intention with which we engage these effective causes.

Normally, we think of martyrs as individuals who are murdered or executed by other human beings in conjunction with the religious or spiritual commitments of the former. However, other human beings are merely the

means through which Divinity carries out the execution -- although, once again, those who participate in the execution must bear the responsibility for the condition of the *niyat* or intention through which they participate in the means used by God to bring about the death of another individual.

Everyone dies, but not everyone who dies is a martyr. A martyr must be someone who is sincerely struggling in the way of God.

The Qur'an indicates: "Do not think of those who are slain in the way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord, they have provision. Jubilant (are they) because of that which Allah has bestowed upon them of His bounty" (3:169-170)

In a variety of places within the Muslim world, the idea is fashionable that only those who are engaged in armed, physical combat can be martyred. Certain individuals use this belief to encourage impressionable individuals to engage in warfare with the understanding that if they die in the process, they will achieve martyrdom.

They believe that Quranic verses like the ones cited above refer only to those who die while fighting a physical battle with the infidel -- and, all too frequently, an infidel is considered to be anyone who doesn't look at life and Divinity in precisely the same way as do those who feel compelled to assume the role of 'defenders' of Islam, when, in truth, they often are nothing more than defenders of this or that theological, philosophical, national, and/or economic self-interest.

In whatever manner an individual might meet her or his appointed time with death, if that person dies while occupied in struggling to pursue Deen and realize the purpose of life, then, that individual satisfies, God willing, the criterion of being "slain in the way of Allah" that is mentioned in the foregoing Quranic verse. Moreover, as promised in the Quranic passage following the statement of qualification, such individuals will be spiritually alive, enjoying a provision from their Lord and jubilant with the Divine bounty that has been bestowed upon them.

The Qur'an gives the following counsel: "O you who believe, fight against those infidels close to you." (9:123) There is no infidel closer to us than our own *nafsi-amaara* that is the seat of all our tendencies to rebel against, and resist, the Divine Purpose. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Your most hostile enemy is your carnal soul

that is enclosed between your two sides,” and the Qur’an states: “Truly, the soul commands unto evil.” (12:53)

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said: “Die before you die.” In addition, among the collection of Hadith Qudsi one finds the following: “Whoever seeks Me, finds Me. Whoever finds Me, comes to know Me. Whoever comes to know Me, loves Me. Whoever loves Me, that person I kill, and whomever I kill, I owe that person blood-money, and to whomever I owe blood- money, I am the recompense for that blood-money.” Consequently, the form of death to which the Prophet alluded when he said: “Die before you die” reflects the sort of death to which the just mentioned Hadith Qudsi attempts to draw our attention.

The same kind of individuals who wish to reserve the Quranic title of “those who are slain in the way of Allah” for only those who fight armed battles with this or that external enemy or those who are executed by wrongly-guided people, also like to restrict the meaning of “jihad” entirely to the realm of physical fighting. Nevertheless, the term ‘jihad’ -- which refers to struggle -- clearly was used by the Prophet in a number of ways that indicate the meaning and significance of ‘jihad’ must be considered from a perspective that places this spiritual activity in a very different light than do those who claim that ‘jihad’ means doing physical battle.

The Prophet is reported to have said: “The best and most superior form of jihad (spiritual struggle) is the Hajj (pilgrimage) which finds acceptance with God.” On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: “One performs the best jihad when one stands up and speaks out against injustice in the face of tyranny and oppression.”

Once, when the Prophet and some Companions were riding together, as they returned from a armed engagement with the Meccan tribes who were trying to vanquish the Muslim community, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have turned to his Companions and said: “We are coming from the lesser jihad, and we going to the greater jihad.” The “lesser jihad” is doing battle with an external enemy, while the “greater jihad” is doing battle with our own, internal enemy.

At, yet, another time, the Prophet is reported to have said: “Polish takes away the rust of that which is polished, and for everything, there is a polish. The polish for the heart is dhikr Allah (remembrance of God).”

One of the Companions asked: “Is not repelling the infidel like this?”

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “No! Even if one fights until one’s sword is broken.”

Although the word ‘jihad’ does not appear in this latter tradition, the spirit of this Hadith is quite clear. It is both consistent with, as well as supportive of, the three previously cited Hadiths concerning the nature of ‘jihad’ as being about a form of struggle that encompasses practices and activities of self-purification that have far higher priority than does armed conflict with an external enemy -- even in those limited cases where the latter might be justified [such as when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was given permission by Allah to defend the fledgling Muslim community against the attacks of those who were trying to destroy that community as well as the Deen in which it was rooted].

Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah be pleased with him) did not wage physical war against the religious clerics of his time. He was, however, sincerely engaged in ‘jihad’.

He fought the infidel that was closest to him -- his nafsi-amaara. He spoke the truth in the face of the tyranny and oppression of his own nafsi-amaara. When, by the Grace of God, this foe was subdued, the banners of fana (the Presence of Divinity and the absence of self-awareness) and baqa (the presence of Self-awareness subsisting through Divinity) were raised, and the victorious One proclaimed: “Ana’l Haq”.

Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) complied with the counsel of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and he ‘died before he died’. How he died, in a physical sense, is a matter of historical fact, but the truth about his two deaths is between him and God -- and, in both cases, there is substantial evidence to indicate that he is one of “those who are slain in the way of Allah” (3:169).

57 - Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi

Page 28 - Chapter Two: [a further example of the differences between Sufi sobriety and intoxication] “can be found in the contrast between the two literary high points of the Sufi tradition, Ibn Arabi and Jalal ad-Din Rumi. The former wrote voluminously in Arabic prose and addressed every theoretical issue that arises in the context of Islamic thought and practice. His works are enormously erudite and exceedingly difficult, and only the most learned of Muslims, those already trained in jurisprudence, Kalam, and other Islamic sciences, could have hoped to read and understand them. In contrast, Rumi wrote over 70,000 verses of intoxicating poetry in a language that any Persian-speaking Muslim could understand.”

Commentary: The author is quite misleading, if not incorrect, when he claims that Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote “poetry in a language that any Persian-speaking Muslim could understand.” While Persian-speaking Muslims might have been able to read the words of Rumi’s poetry (may Allah be pleased with him), and while they might have been able to understand, on certain levels, some of the truth being conveyed through various verses, only someone who shared the same, or a similar, spiritual plateau as Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) could have understood and fully appreciated what was being communicated through his poetry.

If this were not the case, then, in effect, the author is maintaining that anyone, irrespective of their spiritual condition, could understand the depths of Rumi’s spiritual wisdom (may Allah be pleased with him) just by reading his poetry. There would be no need for Revelation, or the Prophetic tradition, or a shaykh, or a silsilah, or a process of purification, or a discipline, or practices, or anything else.

Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) would not have agreed with this. Yet, if one tries to argue that “any Persian-speaking Muslim could understand” the language of Rumi’s poetry (may Allah be pleased with him), one tends to end up with a position that says that all one needs is a copy of the *Divan* or *Mathnawi*, and one can understand even the most subtle of mystical conditions, stations, states, and realms.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is also misleading, if not incorrect, when he contends that the writings of ibn al -‘Arabi (especially *Futuh al-Makkiyya* - *Meccan Openings* - and *Fusus alhikam* - *Bezels of*

*Wisdom* - may Allah be pleased with him) consists of material that is “enormously erudite and exceedingly difficult, and only the most learned of Muslims, those already trained in jurisprudence, Kalam, and other Islamic sciences, could have hoped to read and understand them.” Although the writings of ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) can be characterized, quite correctly, as “enormously erudite” -- especially the two aforementioned works -- the aspect of difficulty tends to be encountered by those who lack those spiritual stations that enable an individual to understand the meaning and significance of what is being said.

Furthermore, to say that “only the most learned of Muslims, those already trained in jurisprudence, Kalam, and other Islamic sciences could have hoped to read and understand them” is completely wrong. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

Ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) was not only extremely well-versed in all of the usual disciplines that are taught by jurists, clerics, and theologians, but he also understood the limitations of both the approach in which such disciplines were couched, as well as the mentality that often accompanied such discourse. Consequently, he sometimes wrote in a way that, on the one hand, was intended to camouflage certain aspects of the truth in relation to those who were trained in disciplines such as jurisprudence and Kalam, while, on the other hand, still providing the commentary, allusions, and explanations that would benefit those who were sincere seekers after the sort of essential truths that were being communicated through ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul).

People -- irrespective of how scholastically well -trained or knowledgeable they might be -- could derive spiritual benefit from his works. His works explored themes such as the essential meaning of Deen, along with the purpose and potential of human existence ... themes in which everyone had an interest, to one degree or another.

He provided the relevant ideas, observations, experiences, commentaries, elaborations, issues, problems, and so on as he went along. If a person was not familiar with some facet of Deen before reading ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul), then, such an individual knew about that facet after reading him. At the same time, if someone was familiar with the traditional perspectives of philosophers, jurists, and theologians, then, ibn al-‘Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) analyzed those perspectives in a way that shed new light on old issues and introduced

readers to dimensions of possibility in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which had been ignored, buried, misunderstood, or distorted by many forms of traditional scholarship.

If ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) "addressed every theoretical issue that arises in the context of Islamic thought and practice", this is not because he was a theoretician. Instead, he was an advocate and practitioner of the sciences of experiential unveiling, and he was using the shortcomings and problems inherent in theoretical perspectives -- that were devoid of any direct experience of the Real -- as so many staging areas for the construction of the sort of conceptual scaffolding that would permit individuals to build a launching pad for exploration of the Self and that, eventually, could be left behind when concepts were replaced by the 'realities' for which the various conceptual place-holders were helping to prepare the individual for the time of mystical 'lift-off'.

Oftentimes, the people who have the most difficulty with the work of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) are those who are unwilling to believe there could be any processes of understanding or knowing that are not a function of rational reasoning processes. *Meccan Openings* and *Bezels of Wisdom* are both expressions of direct, spiritual unveiling, and they contain the kind of insights, understanding and wisdom that can never be generated by, or grasped through, purely rational modalities.

A theoretician is caught up in, and limited to, the form of imagination -- discussed previously -- which is 'fiction oriented', and tends to fashion plausible story-lines drawn from this or that combination of interpreted information. There might be various points of congruence between such a theory and those aspects of experience and phenomenology to which the theory is making reference, and there might be different elements of truth or reality that are reflected in, or given expression through, the structural character of the theory, but, for the most part, a theory is a forced imposition upon reality rather than a process of apprehension concerning some facet of imaginal truth that is characteristic of the spiritual understanding that arises out of experiential unveiling.

In fact, this theoretical sort of imagination can never access imaginal or spiritual worlds. At most, this approach can take this or that item of someone else's direct experience of such spiritual realms and incorporate those features into a fiction-based framework that, then, is

projected onto spirituality while, simultaneously, assuming (not necessarily correctly) that the former is an accurate depiction of the latter.

Just as it was exceedingly difficult for scholastic philosophers to accept the idea that thought must be answerable to the rigors of empirical observation and experiment, so too, those who are dependent on lower-order, creative, fiction-oriented imagination have difficulty in accepting the proposal that theoretical constructions concerning spirituality are answerable to the rigors of direct, experiential unveiling of spiritual truths. Indeed, this proposal is so difficult for some of these individuals to accept, that they tend to project their own condition onto people like ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) and believe he is doing nothing more than engaging in an exercise of lower-order, fiction-oriented, creative imagination.

The poetry of Rumi (may Allah sanctify his soul) is rooted in the experiences of unveiling. The prose of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) arises, as well, from the same source. In fact, both authors can be likened, somewhat, to a loon -- a bird that is known for, among other things, its haunting call in the dark of night, as well as its capacity to disappear beneath the surface of a body of water and stay down for long periods of time only to re-surface quite some distance away.

Each of these authors is calling to those who are, relatively speaking, in spiritual darkness but who are willing to listen to the plaintive cry of the mystical quest. Each of these authors writes in such a way that although, for a time, some of their meanings are visible and accessible, suddenly, without warning, the meanings have disappeared beneath the surface -- no longer visible and accessible.

To discover these latter meanings, one must develop the capacities of a loon. One must learn how to dive into the depths of spirituality.

For someone of the requisite spiritual experience and insight, the works of Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul) are no more difficult to understand than are the writings of Rumi (may Allah sanctify his soul). Moreover, contrary to what the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains, the key issue here is neither linguistic style, nor is it a matter of how much one knows about such things as Kalam, Hadith, jurisprudence, and the like.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord." The works of both Rumi, as well as ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify their souls) are detailed explorations into the question of what it means to know oneself and, through oneself, one's Lord.

If you want to understand Rumi (may Allah sanctify his soul), find your Shams (may Allah sanctify his soul) and fall in love. If you want to understand ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify his soul), then, go through the lived experience of your own version of 'Meccan Openings', and become intoxicated with the Truth. If one has done neither of the foregoing, then, irrespective of one's facility with Persian or Arabic, and irrespective of one's knowledge of jurisprudence and theology, one will not understand the essence of what is being said by either Rumi or ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah sanctify their souls) --although one might enjoy this or that verse, or find, of interest, one, or another, discussion.



### 58 - Allegations

Page 29 - Chapter Two: “In the classical Sufi texts, there are two basic complementary ways of describing Sufism. If the drunken side of Sufism is stressed, it is pictured as disdainful toward jurisprudence and Kalam. If sobriety is stressed, it is viewed as the inner life (*ihsan*) of right practice (*islam*) and right faith (*iman*).”

Commentary: The author does not specify what he considers the “classical Sufi texts” to be, nor does he identify whom he has in mind when he speaks about instances where either the drunken side or sober side of things is allegedly being stressed. In addition, the author does not put forth any proof that would substantiate his charge that when “the drunken side of Sufism is stressed, it is pictured as disdainful toward jurisprudence and Kalam”.

“Disdainful” is a very strong word. It involves having contempt for something, as well a tendency to heap scorn upon some person, idea, or practice that one considers to be unworthy of consideration or beneath one in some way.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Muslims are brothers and sisters in Deen, and they must not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt. The seat of righteousness is the heart, and the heart that is righteous does not hold a Muslim in contempt.” Consequently, if there were people who satisfied the foregoing criteria with respect to having a ‘disdainful’ attitude toward, or regard for, jurisprudence and Kalam, one might want to question whether such individuals actually were either genuine initiates of the Sufi path, and if so, whether they were active practitioners of the teachings of the path since having disdain for anyone is a very un-Sufi like perspective.

One might poke fun at, or use some sort of humorous hyperbole with respect to, a position or an argument without, necessarily, being disdainful toward that which one’s barbs are being directed. One also might raise issues of hypocrisy and self-righteousness concerning the way some people either do not practice what they preach or assume an ‘holier than thou’ demeanor with respect to all with whom they come in contact.

A given Sufi writer might be interested in pointing out the inconsistencies or limitations of a given perspective without feeling

compelled to indulge in being disdainful toward that with which one disagrees. Moreover, one might engage in a case study that discloses the foolishness of various ways of doing, or thinking about, certain things, but use this exercise as a means of talking about the potential for folly within all of us -- yet, one does not have to be disdainful to do this.

Alternatively, some Sufi writer might get irritated, annoyed, frustrated, impatient, or upset concerning the manner in which different theologians and jurists might be attempting to persuade, if not brainwash, people to turn away from such fundamental issues as the realization of essential identity and the attainment of one's unique spiritual capacity. However, displaying irritation, annoyance, frustration, or impatience, is not necessarily the same as showing disdain for others or their positions.

In truth, more often than not, when faced with the verbal and physical attacks of people who fail to understand the nature of the Sufi path, followers of this 'Way' try to observe the counsel that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave to his wife. "O 'Aisha, swallow, patiently, the bitter taste of this world and await the sweet bliss of the Hereafter."

With respect to the Hereafter, the Prophet is reported to have said: "I swear by God that this world in comparison with the world to come is as though one of you put a finger into the sea -- let that person consider what amount of water is brought out of the sea, and what remains." People who take to heart the implications of the Prophet's words in this Hadith have little interest in either feeling, or exhibiting, disdain for jurisprudence or Kalam -- although the former individuals might feel badly for those who wish to restrict themselves to purely rationalistic ways of engaging Deen and Divinity, and, as a result, potentially close themselves off to certain dimensions of the vastness of the world to come..

The problem with the author's foregoing characterization of things is that his statements are vague and unaccompanied by any corroborating evidence. Unfortunately, these kinds of problem -- along with many others -- surface at many points throughout his book, and, consequently, whatever people are being introduced to, all too frequently, it is not the Sufi path.

### 59 - Self-knowledge

Page 32 - Chapter Three: “One of the terms often used in the classical texts to designate what I call ‘Sufism’ is *ma’rifa* (or *irfan*), a term that literally means ‘knowledge’ or ‘recognition’. However, the term connotes a special, deeper knowledge of things that can only be achieved by personal transformation, and hence it is often translated as ‘gnosis’. The goal and fruit of this type of knowledge is commonly explained by citing the Prophet’s saying, ‘He who knows [*arafa*] himself knows his Lord.’ As the Hadith suggests, this sort of knowledge demands a simultaneous acquisition of both self-knowledge and God- knowledge. The texts tell us repeatedly that it cannot be found in books. Rather, it is already present in the heart, but it is hidden deep beneath the dross of ignorance, forgetfulness, outwardly oriented activity, and rational articulation. Access to this knowledge comes only by following the path that leads to human perfection.”

Commentary: Although *ma’rifa* or *irfan* might constitute a condition of fundamental importance on the Sufi path, nonetheless, contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, the latter cannot be reduced down to the former such that *ma’rifa* “designates” Sufism. The path consists of many issues, difficulties, trials, questions, teachings, stages, states, stations, experiences, as well as various modalities of unveiling -- and *ma’rifa* is but one possibility ... albeit, an important one.

In addition, one is not quite certain why the author says that because ‘*ma’rifa*’ supposedly “connotes a special, deeper knowledge of things that can only be achieved by personal transformation” - “hence [my emphasis] it is often translated as ‘gnosis.’” *Ma’rifa*, *irfan*, and *gnosis* are different ways of referring to a knowledge of Divine mysteries that: (a) might be preceded by certain sorts of change in the life of an individual; or; (b) the realization of such knowledge might be followed by the sorts of change being alluded to; or; (c) the presence of this knowledge might itself constitute the essential change in the life of a person, but the significance of “hence” in conjunction with “gnosis” seems rather tenuous.

In any event, the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to which the author refers -- namely, “He who knows himself knows his Lord” -- does not suggest, as the author seeks to maintain, that “this sort of knowledge demands a simultaneous acquisition of both self-knowledge and God-knowledge.” There is only one kind of knowledge involved.

True knowledge of the 'Self' is God knowledge since the 'Self' is the locus of manifestation for the disclosures of the Divine Names and Attributes that are expressed through unveiling. When one knows the 'Self', one knows the mirror that reflects Divine knowledge, and, consequently, one has direct, experiential access to, as well as -- within the limits of a given human capacity -- veridical understanding of, that which is being reflected as it is reflected.

Furthermore, there are many mysteries of God to which an individual might be exposed through unveiling. While the heart encompasses an array of modalities of knowing -- such as the 'fo'ad' that sees, whereas the qalb knows in, yet another manner -- nonetheless, not all Divine mysteries can be known through the heart. The heart is but one of the instruments of knowing that is contained, as a potential, within the fitra, or spiritual capacity of a human being.

Conceivably, the author might be thinking of, or alluding to, the Hadith Qudsi that came through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in which Allah is reported to have said: "My heavens and My earth do not contain Me, but the heart of My believing servant doth contain Me." The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* might have interpreted this tradition to mean that all knowledge of Divinity is contained in the heart of the believing servant, but, in reality, God does not specify in what manner Divinity is contained in the heart of a believing servant -- God only indicates that whatever this way might be, it involves something that cannot be achieved or duplicated by either the heavens or the earth.

Moreover, whatever the capacity of the heart is for knowing various mysteries of Divinity, Gnostic knowledge is not so much inherent in the heart, as much as the heart has a capacity for receiving, being aware of, understanding, and reflecting the knowledge of whatever Divine mysteries are disclosed to one, or another, of its facilities for knowing such mysteries. Therefore, the author is incorrect in the previous excerpt when he claims that such knowledge "is already present in the heart, but it is hidden deep beneath the dross of ignorance, forgetfulness, outwardly oriented activity, and rational articulation."

To be sure, the "dross of ignorance, forgetfulness", and so on -- which constitute the rust of the heart -- must be removed through the polishing effect of practices such as dhikr, or remembrance of God. Nevertheless, the process of polishing, cleansing, or purifying the heart as an instrument of

knowledge is to enable it to serve as a properly working mirror so that it might receive and reflect the Divine mysteries which give expression to that knowledge.

Finally, when the author asserts that “access to this knowledge comes only by following the path that leads to human perfection” he is not quite correct. In truth, such knowledge is not a function of “following the path that leads to human perfection” since not only is the arrival of this knowledge by the Grace of God -- rather than caused by following a given Path, in and of itself -- but, also, because such knowledge is a potential that is activated through the realization of fitra, or spiritual capacity, as opposed to a pursuit of human perfection.

Doing the best we can do in accordance with what, by the Grace of Allah, our spiritual potential is capable, is not necessarily the same thing as “human perfection”. One can speak about the possibility of realizing spiritual capacity without having to introduce a topic -- namely, ‘perfection’ -- which, probably, is most appropriately spoken of in relation to Divinity.



60 - Mystical Science

Page 33 - Chapter Three: "I said earlier that 'theoretical Sufism' represents one of the three main approaches to faith or understanding. I suggested that Sufi theory is different from other theorizing because it emphasizes imaginal perception rather than rational investigation."

Commentary: There is no such thing as "theoretical Sufism" except in the context of the author's theory concerning the Sufi path. In other words, the idea of 'theoretical Sufism' is a creation of the author's lower-order, fiction-oriented faculty of imagination.

Furthermore, imaginal, or spiritual, understanding is not a species of 'theorizing'. While there is a certain kind of understanding associated with the process of theorizing (i.e., that which one is seeking to express through a given theory), the understanding that is given expression through imaginal knowledge has nothing to do with the former sort of theory-laden understanding.

The Sufi path is a scientific discipline. In fact, it reflects many, if not most, of the qualities that, generally, are associated with the process of physical science -- but it does so in its own, unique fashion.

There are seven features that tend to characterize modern science. (1) empirical observation; (2) instrumentality, or the use of instruments to enhance and support empirical observation; (3) reliance on a recursive methodology -- which is a series of repetitive steps enabling one, on the one hand, to eliminate extraneous, false, or ambiguous data, while, on the other hand, attaining better, more refined, approximations to various aspects of reality as one proceeds from one cycle of such steps to the next; (4) an emphasis on objectivity through which one seeks to eliminate as many sources of bias, prejudice and distortion as possible; (5) a stress on the ability to replicate experimental and observational reports as a way of providing corroboration of, and a consistency in, empirical data, as well as setting aside possibly anomalous and unreliable results; (6) consensus among a community of knowers that establishes parameters of both general agreement and permitted disagreement in a given area of study; (7) the ability to adapt what has been discovered by means of the foregoing six steps and apply those findings to establish predictions and insights concerning various outcomes, behaviors, and so on, in relation to different facets of reality that have not, yet, been explored or encountered.

Not all sciences necessarily give expression to the seven steps outlined above with the same degree of success. Furthermore, there often are disputes concerning the precise nature, boundaries, significance, and/or reliability of such steps in any given set of circumstances.

Nevertheless, if one examines those disciplines that tend to refer to themselves as a form of science and, therefore, employ a set of activities that distinguishes what is done in such disciplines from the kinds of activities pursued by, say, philosophers, theologians, or those who study mythology, then, most modern sciences will exhibit almost all of the seven steps noted above, whereas the other, non-scientific disciplines will not, for the most part, engage in the same sorts of activities. Although the latter forms of activity might display an interest in, or a concern with, several of the aforementioned seven steps, these latter disciplines rarely, if ever, employ all seven features as part of a regular way of engaging and studying the phenomena of experience -- and, to whatever extent they do try this, they tend to produce problematic, unreliable, or questionable results.

Quite frequently, when many people compare 'science' and 'religion', they think of science as being about: 'reality', 'truth', 'facts', 'experiment', 'proof', and 'exactitude', whereas many of these same individuals think of religion in terms of: 'ethics', 'morality', 'ideals', 'beliefs', 'opinions', 'dogma', and 'values'. Whether, or not, people believe religion has anything to do with 'reality', they feel there tends to be precious little in the way of 'facts', 'proof', 'experiment' or 'exactitude'.

When mysticism enters the picture, most people feel the issues become even more problematic. In fact, many people -- especially scientists -- would consider the idea of 'mystical science' as being an oxymoron ... that is, a contradiction in terms.

In truth, however, the Sufi mystical tradition does constitute a science. In other words, all seven steps outlined previously, that were said to be characteristic of modern sciences, also are reflected in the Deen or path of the esoteric dimension of Islam.

In the Qur'an one finds the following verse: "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear that He is the Real (41:53) This verse is just one of many in which the individual is encouraged to explore the world, nature, history, the universe, as well as oneself -- observe, experience, study, reflect, and understand.

The Sufi shaykhs refer to many kinds of experience -- all of which contribute toward helping the individual, God willing, to develop an understanding concerning various dimensions of reality. Dreams, insight, ilham (flashes of intuition), hal (states) and kashf (unveiling) all constitute different modalities of experience.

Of course, just as is the case with modern science, one needs to go through a learning or apprenticeship process in relation to such experiences. A methodology is required to engage, analyze, and understand the meaning, value and significance of different kinds of experience.

People do not come into this world as certified members of a community of science. They must go through a process of education and training that introduces them to the vocabulary, instruments, practices, methods, techniques, history, and problems of the scientific process.

Similarly, individuals do not come into this world as full-blown practitioners of mystical science. A process of education and training is required that serves to introduce them to the Path in much the same way as high schools, universities, graduate schools, and laboratories initiate would-be, modern scientists into some given discipline.

Moreover, someone who is not prepared to take the time, make the effort, and struggle toward developing an appreciation for, and understanding of, how modern science operates is not really in a position to provide useful insight concerning what someone might, or might not, discover or come to know through the process of science. In the same way, someone who is not willing to spend the time or make the effort to develop a facility with the manner in which mystical science conducts itself, also is not in a position to offer anything very useful with respect to what an individual might, or might not, discover or come to know through pursuing the mystical path.

Modern scientists rely on the use of instruments to extend the capacity of different sensory modalities to probe various realms of experience. This reliance on instrumentality not only enhances the levels of reality to which scientists have access but, as well, provides an opportunity to gain more refined measurements of that which is being experienced.

Sufi mystical sciences also rely on the use of instruments to enable a traveler of the path to probe reality in ways that our eyes, ears, and other

biological modalities of sensing cannot. However, rather than fashioning instruments from wood, metals, glass, and other materials, the instrumentation of mystical sciences are found within us, and instead of being limited to the material world -- as is the instrumentation of modern science -- the instruments of authentic mysticism have a potential, God willing, for gaining access to an array of spiritual worlds.

Of course, Sufis, like modern scientists, consider the mind -- or our rational faculty -- to be an important tool or instrument. Nonetheless, beyond our capacity for logical thought and rational analysis, there are a number of other internal instruments that are used to engage, explore, and understand the realities of the Sufi path.

For example, there is something referred to as the 'heart' -- which is more than the piece of flesh within our chests -- and is an instrument for achieving gnosis with respect to certain kinds of Divine mystery. The 'sirr', or mystery, is characterized as an instrument that is capable of witnessing different realms of spirituality that is different from, but complementary to, the process of gnosis.

In addition, there is 'ruh', or the spirit, which is an instrument that encompasses an array of modalities that tap into, so to speak, various dimensions of the infinity to which Divine love gives expression. As well, there is the 'kafi', or hidden, which is an instrument that is capable of accessing different spiritual lights and colors within the realm of Divine Dominion -- which is, yet, another level of spiritual reality, knowledge, wisdom, and mysteries.

Finally, there is the instrument known as 'aqfah'. This reflects the very essence of what human beings are capable of knowing with respect to Divinity.

The foregoing kinds of spiritual instrumentation, when taken collectively, give expression to the fitra, or spiritual potential, of the human being. However, like the instruments of modern science, spiritual instruments must be cleaned, calibrated, and tested to make sure they are in proper working order and capable of transmitting reliable data, images, readings, results, and so on.

In the story -- "The Thousand and Second Night", Edgar Allen Poe had Scheherazade tell the Sultan a new tale of wonder. In this new adventure she did not talk -- as she had in the previous 1001 tales, of Sinbad or

Aladdin, and of magic or sorcery. Instead, she told of the wonders of 19<sup>th</sup> century science -- such as the telescope, the telegraph, and the steam engine.

Upon hearing of these marvels, the Sultan responded that her previous stories that spoke of such things as genies, flying carpets, and magic lamps had been believable. Yet, this talk of steam engines, telegraphs, and the like, was quite preposterous.

To those who are somewhat familiar with some of the instruments of modern science, mention of things such as electron microscopes, spectroscopic analysis, or quantum tunneling might seem amazing but, nevertheless, quite believable. These are the stories with which many people are familiar in this day and age.

When someone comes along in the modern world and begins talking about other kinds of instrumentation that are able to explore beyond the physical/material world, the response of most people - whether scientist or not, is to believe that this kind of talk is quite preposterous. Like the Sultan in Poe's story, such responses are limited to the world of discourse and possibility from which the 'normal' world of sensibilities has been constructed, and the tendency of most people is to reject whatever falls outside the parameters of that which is considered to be part of 'established' reality.

Not only does the Sufi mystical path make use of instrumentation, it employs, as well, a recursive methodology, just as modern science does. For instance, consider the following verses from the Qur'an: "But those will prosper who purify themselves and glorify the Name of their Guardian Lord, and lift their hearts in prayer." (87:14 -15)

Purification, dhikr (or Divine remembrance), and prayer are three, complementary, key components of the Sufi path. Furthermore, these different aspects of the mystical methodology are intended to be recursive in the sense that their application carries over from one stage to the next, and the empirical, experiential results that arise in conjunction with these stages are added, on an ongoing basis, to the current data pool, so to speak, that continues to be engaged through this repetitive process.

Each of the foregoing components of spiritual methodology encompasses a range of possibilities. For example, purification is often described in the following manner.

The carnal soul is the seat of our rebellious tendencies against the Divine Purpose. The process of purification that is directed at the nafs is known as *tadhkiya-i-nafs*, and, among other things, it focuses on assisting the individual to resist engaging life through the corrupting and problematic qualities of jealousy, envy, greed, selfishness, anger, lust, and pride.

The Qur'an refers to one facet of the foregoing process when it speaks of: "Those who spend their wealth for increase in self-purification, and have in their minds no favor from anyone for which a reward is expected in return, but only the desire to seek the Countenance of their Lord Most High." (92:18 -20) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) approached the same issue from a slightly different direction when he is reported to have said in relation to the issue of *zakat* (which is a process of purifying wealth through charity): "For everything there is a *zakat*, and the *zakat* of the body is obedience [to Divinity]".

In an earlier commentary a reference was made to Surah Shams in the Qur'an which begins in the following fashion:

"I swear by the sun and his brightness,  
And by the moon when she follows him,  
And by the day when it reveals him,  
And by the night when it enshrouds him,  
And by the heaven and Him who built it,  
And by the earth and Him Who spread it,  
And by the Soul and Him Who perfected it,  
And inspired it with knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing,  
He is, indeed, successful who causes the soul to grow,  
And he who stunts the soul's growth surely fails. (91:1 -10)

As was indicated previously, the rhetorical style of the Qur'an is such that when Divinity wishes to draw attention to the importance of a given theme or issue, one of the ways that is employed is through the use of 'oaths'. The more oaths that are listed, the more important is the topic being addressed.

Nowhere else in the Qur'an are there as many oaths strung together as at the beginning of Surah Shams. Consequently,

purification of the soul is of paramount importance -- indeed, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Islam is built upon cleanliness."

The nafs, or soul, is an enormous entity. Some Sufi shaykhs speak in terms of seven different dimensions of the soul, and the process of purification leads, if God wishes, from one dimension to the next.

These levels of the soul include: (1) nafs-amaara - or, the domineering self; (2) nafs-lawwaama - the censorious self; (3) nafs-mulhima - the inspiring self; (4) nafs-mutma'inna - the tranquil self; (5) nafs-raadiya - the contented self; (6) nafs-mardeeya - the pleasing self, and (7) nafs-saafiya - the pure self.

The first three levels, or dimensions, encompass the vast majority of people. The second set of three levels applies to the spiritual elite, and the last dimension - (7) - refers only to the elite of the elite.

Besides the process of purification, the spiritual recursive methodology also involves remembrance of God, and there are numerous references in both the Qur'an and the Hadith concerning the importance of dhikr Allah or remembrance of God. For example, the Qur'an stipulates that while: "Ritual worship preserves from lewdness and iniquity, yet, verily, remembrance of Allah is more important." (29:45)

Some individuals rush past such verses in the Qur'an because these verses pose problems for the manner in which these people understand the nature and purpose of spiritual methodology. Quite frequently, such individuals believe ritual worship is more important than dhikr, and don't know quite what to make of passages in the Qur'an which indicate that although ritual worship has tremendous value, nonetheless, remembrance of God is better and more important.

The importance of dhikr, relative to prayer, is, again, confirmed in the aforementioned Quranic verse (87:14-15) which indicates that those people will prosper who: purify themselves, remember God, and pray. All three are of essential importance, but the order of appearance is: purification, dhikr, and, then, prayer.

Elsewhere, the Qur'an refers to: "Those whom neither merchandise, nor selling, diverts them from the remembrance of God, from establishing the prayer, and giving of zakat" (24:37) Once again, remembrance of God is stated first, and, then, establishing the prayer.

To give priority to dhikr does not mean prayers can be abandoned. At the same time, establishing prayers in a context devoid of dhikr is also problematic. Indeed, the Qur'an seeks to direct people's attention to precisely the latter state of affairs, when it warns: "If anyone forsakes the remembrance of the Most gracious, We appoint for that person a devil, to be an intimate companion and who will hinder them from the path. Yet, they think they are being guided in the right direction." (43:36-37)

The Qur'an speaks about: "Those who believe and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah -- for without doubt, in the remembrance of Allah, do hearts find satisfaction." The Qur'an also reminds us: "And do not be like those who forgot Allah, and Allah made them forget their own souls. Such are rebellious transgressors." (59:19)

In the foregoing, the Qur'an informs us of some of the benefits of observing zikr.. At the same time, the Qur'an warns of the potential consequences that might befall those who forget the remembrance of Allah.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "When people gather together to remember God: the angels surround them; mercy covers them; peace descends on them, and God remembers them among those who are with God." The Prophet also is reported to have said: "Accursed is the world and accursed is all that is in the world, except the remembrance of God and that which aids remembrance." Surely, the stress that these statements give to the importance of remembrance is in full resonance with the verses of the Qur'an noted above.

Along with purification and remembrance of God, prayer, as previously indicated, is also a central component of the recursive methodology of the Sufi path. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The root of all prayers is renunciation of the world, and the love of the world is the root of all mischief." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Pray without ceasing."

Obviously, on the basis of the foregoing traditions of the Prophet, something more is encompassed by the idea of 'prayer' than five-times-a-day ritual worship. To be sure, the latter is very important, since Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Between a person and apostasy [desertion of one's faith], there is only the giving of Salat [i.e., formal, ritual prayer]," and, yet, to counsel seekers -- as the Prophet did in the traditions cited above -- that the essence of prayers involves renouncing the world and that one should do this without ceasing is to enter

spiritual territory that might begin with the ritual prayers that are said five times a day but, at the same time, extends considerably beyond the horizons of this Pillar of Islam.

There are, at least, two other Hadiths concerning the nature of prayer that are instructive here. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Prayer is: service; drawing closer, and joining." At another time, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Prayer is the sacrifice whereby every believer comes closer to Allah."

Although ritual prayer does offer, God willing, an opportunity for Divine service, drawing closer to God, and joining with Divinity, and while ritual prayer also constitutes a form of sacrifice through which an individual, God willing, comes closer to Allah, nevertheless, one can understand these traditions in another way. More specifically, any sacrifice that, God willing, enables an individual to be drawn closer to God is a form of prayer, and, similarly, any process of spiritual service, drawing closer to God, and joining with Divinity give expression to the essence of prayer since all of these activities involve a renunciation of the world that the Prophet has said is the root of all prayers.

One struggles toward complying with the Prophet's counsel to pray without ceasing not just through observing the five daily prayers, but by engaging a variety of processes involving spiritual service, drawing closer, sacrifice, and, if God wishes, joining. Indeed, a person who is 'joined' with God is an individual who prays without ceasing by virtue of her or his spiritual condition.

Purification, remembrance of God, and prayer are all examples -- taken individually or collectively-- of a spiritual recursive methodology inaction. These practices generate empirical data, operate on empirical data, and feed such data back into the methodological process.

Whether, God willing, one is engaged in purifying the nafs (tadhkiya-i-nafs), or cleansing the heart (tathfiya-i-qalb) by means of zikr, or emptying the sirr (takhliya-i-sirr), by means of maraqaba (contemplation), of its preoccupations with the world, or illuminating the spirit (tajliya-i-ruh), or passing through various stations -- such as repentance (tauba), patience (sabr), gratitude (shukr), trust (tawakkil), sincerity (iklas), and love (ishk) -- or journeying through different stages of certainty (al-yaqeen) ... all of the foregoing are encompassed within the sphere of the Sufi path's process of recursive methodology that helps clean, calibrate, test, activate, and harmonize the different modalities of instrumentality that are inherent in the fitra or

primordial spiritual capacity of human beings. Furthermore, this spiritual methodology is more rigorous and exacting than anything known to modern science.

In addition to being empirically rooted, relying on instrumentation, and employing recursive methodology, the Sufi path also stresses the importance of 'objectivity' that calls for the removal of all sources of bias, distortion, and whatever else might be interfering with accessing and/or understanding -- according to one's capacity to do so -- the nature of Reality. Ra'bia of Basra once chided a Sufi --who was taking pride in what he thought were his spiritual accomplishments -- by saying: "Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare," and this saying goes to the heart of what 'objectivity' actually entails.

The unpurified, unredeemed, unrepentant, rebellious self constitutes the major obstacle in the way of realizing a condition of 'objectivity'. As long as the 'self' is present, the Self will continue to be veiled, and as long as the latter is veiled, then, Truth and Reality will be largely absent from human awareness.

To be objective, is to let Truth and Reality be manifested without interference or distortion. In general terms, there are two broad forms of essential objectivity: namely, 'fana' and 'baqa'.

Fana is to lose sight of oneself due to an overwhelming realization of God's nearness and presence. Although the English word "annihilation" is often used to translate the condition of fana, in truth, nothing is annihilated.

One 16th-17th century Sufi shaykh characterized fana in the following way. He said that when we are outside, on a clear night, we can see the stars quite vividly. However, when the sun rises, although the stars are still present, the illumination of the sun is so bright that we can no longer see those stars.

Self-awareness can be likened to the stars at night. When the brilliance of Divine presence dawns upon awareness, the self is no longer visible although, like the stars, it still exists.

Baqa, or spiritual subsistence, is when the essential dimension of an individual's spiritual potential becomes established in a context of Divine Presence. Here, creation remains creation, and Creator remains Creator, but the purpose of Creation is fulfilled and, consequently, the Hidden Treasure is

reflected in, or manifested through, the locus of manifestation of a spiritually realized individual.

There is a Hadith Qudsi that gives expression to God's description of such individuals. "My servant does not cease to draw nigh unto Me with acts of free-will offering, until I love him, and when I love him, I am the eye with which he sees; the ear by which he hears; the feet whereon he walks, and the hands by which he holds."

Spiritual potential has been realized. Essential identity is manifest. Spiritual capacity is able to function unimpeded.

All biases, distortions, and obstacles affecting one's ability to reflect the Truth and the Real have been removed. Full objectivity has been established in accordance with the spiritual capacity of a given individual.

The Sufi path is pursued within, and through, a 'community of knowers'. While there might be certain differences of perspective and understanding among some of the members of such a community, there tends to be a consensus concerning the purposes, methods, values, and results that govern and characterize the science that lies at the heart of this community -- just as is the case in relation to modern science.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The learned masters are the inheritors of the Prophets." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "The shaykh among the following of such a shaykh is like a Prophet among the people of that Prophet." And, in the Qur'an one finds: "God appointed for you stars, that you might be guided in the darkness of the land and the sea." (6:97)

Spiritual knowledge is inherited from, and transmitted through, the Prophets. Moreover, one of the primary reasons why a shaykh among his or her followers is like a Prophet among the latter's followers is because each is a locus of distribution for the knowledge, support, assistance, help, encouragement, direction, generosity, kindness, and love that is necessary in the struggle to realize the purpose of life -- indeed, like the stars, this spiritual assistance of the Prophets and the shaykhs - who are the inheritors of the Prophets -- guides one through "the darkness of the land and the sea."

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Knowledge is the lost property of believers." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Seek after knowledge, even unto China." In

addition, the Prophet used to pray: "My Lord! Increase me in knowledge."  
(20:114)

What was the nature of this knowledge to which the Prophet was making reference? In one instance, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Knowledge is of two kinds: formal knowledge that does not go beyond verbal profession. It is the evidence of God against His people, and according to it, He will judge them. The other knowledge is deep-rooted in the heart, and this is the knowledge that is useful." The character of this deep-rooted knowledge was made even clearer when the Prophet is reported to have said: "Should the day come in which I increase not in knowledge whereby to draw nearer to God, then, let the dawn of that day be accursed."

The unanimous consensus of the community of knowers with respect to the nature of the Sufi path can be summed up in the following Hadith Qudsi in which Divinity declares, through the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

"He who seeks Me, finds Me;  
And he who finds Me, comes to know Me;  
And he who knows Me, comes to love Me;  
And he who loves Me, that person I slay;  
And he whom I slay is owed blood-money,  
And the person to whom I owe blood-money, I am the recompense."

The process of seeking and discovery is known as 'tariqat' or traveling on the Path. Coming to know Divinity through the journey of tariqat, gives rise to gnosis, or ma'rifa -- that is, knowledge of Divine mysteries.

Knowledge of God engenders love of Divinity. Eventually, love leads to fana -- that is, the disappearance, or slaying, of the false self, and this, in turn, is followed by, God willing, baqa, or subsistence within an awareness of Divine Presence, that is the Divine recompense for the individual's free-will sacrifice of the self on the altar of the Self.

In addition to the foregoing, the Sufi community of knowers has established a unanimity of consensus with respect to the central teachings of the mystical journey. These teachings are given expression through

a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he is reported to have said:

“Do not attend the circle of any learned person except one who would call upon you to relinquish five things in favor of five other things -

doubt in favor of faith;

hypocrisy in favor of sincerity;

worldliness in favor of asceticism;

pride in favor of humility;

enmity in favor of love.”

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said: “Faith consists in a - profession of the tongue; verification of the heart; and, implementation by the limbs.”

One does not overcome doubt concerning the nature and possibilities of spirituality by becoming opinionated or dogmatic. One only can proceed toward deeper and deeper levels of faith -- which is not a blind belief but a way of knowing -- through a rigorous process of verifying issues of faith via the instrument of the heart.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Be careful concerning the vision of a mu’min (a person of faith), because such a person sees by the Light of Allah.” The knowledge of faith is established in the heart when it is verified as being true and reliable and, thereby, reflects the Light of Divinity.

There are different levels of verification that the Sufi shaykhs sometimes describe in terms of: ‘tasting’, ‘drinking’, and ‘quenching’. Quenching is when an individual has drown in the Ocean of knowledge, and, like a drop of spray that falls back to the water, becomes one with the Ocean.

Furthermore, knowing is not enough. The knowledge must be acted on and implemented.

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “No person will be learned unless one puts one’s knowledge into practice.” On another occasion, he is reported to have said: “One’s knowledge calls to be acted upon. If not satisfied, it will depart.”

This issue of acting upon what one knows touches on the second dyad noted above -- namely, giving up hypocrisy in favor of sincerity. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “May the money-

worshiper perish; may the belly-worshiper perish; may the sex-worshiper perish; may the clothes-worshiper perish.”

Certainly, anyone who is pre-occupied with worshiping money, food, sex, or clothes cannot be preoccupied with worshiping Divinity, and, consequently, anyone who is so preoccupied would be insincere if they professed an abiding love for God. On the other hand, the Prophet’s words can be understood as a sincere declaration, if not prayer, for those who are preoccupied in these kinds of worship to perish away from such pursuits -preferably, in a spiritual sense.

The Prophet also is reported to have said: “All human beings are doomed to perish except those of action, and all the people of action are doomed to perish except those who are sincere, and the sincere are at great risk.” In the Qur’an, one finds the following verses: “We did not create the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in play.” (44:38) “Lo! We have placed all that is on earth as an ornament thereof, that We may try them - which of them is best in conduct.” (18:7) “Do they not see that they are tried once or twice in every year, yet, they do not turn (to Reality), nor do they take heed.” (9:126) “And, surely, We shall test you with some fear and hunger and loss of wealth and lives and crops, but give glad tidings to the steadfast - who say, when misfortune strikes them: ‘Surely to Allah we belong and to Allah is our returning.’” (2:155-156)

Those who would be sincere are at ‘great risk’ because that sincerity will be tested -- again and again and again. According to the Qur’an, this process of testing is not a game, and the stakes are very high.

As the aforementioned tradition concerning sincerity indicated, action is not enough. One must not only act on what one knows, one must do so in a sincere fashion. In the words of the Qur’an: “The people of true faith are those who trust in Allah and the Messenger of God and who have left doubt behind, and who strive hard in Allah’s cause with their possessions and their lives. They are the ones who are sincere.” (49:15)

The Sufi community of knowers invites people to give up worldliness in favor of asceticism. In the section on recursive methodology, discussed previously, a Hadith of the Prophet was included that stipulated that “renunciation of the world is the root of all prayers, and love of the world is the root of all mischief.” The Prophet also is reported to have said: “The inability to weep is caused by hardness of the heart; hardness of heart is caused by a multiplicity of sins; multiplicity of

sins is caused by forgetfulness of death; forgetfulness of death is caused by ambitious expectations; ambitious expectations are caused by excessive love of this world.”

There are many places in the Qur’an that counsel against following a course of worldliness. For example: “Have you seen him who has taken his caprice to be his god, and Allah sends that person astray purposely, and seals up that individual’s hearing and heart, and sets a covering over that person’s sight.” (45:23) “And whoever is blind in this world will be blind in the Hereafter, and even further from the road.” (17:72)

The Prophet also is reported to have said: “Live in this world as if one were going to live here for a thousand years, and live for the next world as if one were going to die tomorrow.” If one were going to be living in this world for a thousand years, how would one proceed? Surely, one would do all that one could do make life as fulfilling, peaceful, and harmonious as possible - not only with respect to oneself but with respect to others, as well.

We must live with the consequences of our actions. Pursuing a course of action that has a potential for generating the most felicitous results for us -- individually and collectively -- is to give expression to wisdom.

Consequently, actions involving generosity, kindness, love, forgiveness, tolerance, honesty, integrity, courage, friendliness, and so on, might have the best chance of producing a set of results with which we can live, and in which we can flourish. These qualities would be especially important to nurture if we were to have to live with the consequences of our actions for a thousand years.

On the other hand, if we were going to die tomorrow, then, we would want to do those things that were most likely to benefit us. The Qur’an says: “By the declining day, indeed, human beings are in a state of loss except such as have faith and do righteous deeds, and join in the mutual teaching of the Truth, and who are patient and constant.” (102:1-3)

What symbol of our impending demise could be more haunting than for Allah to swear, or take an oath -- namely, by “the declining day”? Is not all of life nothing but a declining day upon which night soon will descend?

So, knowing that we will die -- maybe tomorrow -- how should we engage the present life? The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “This life is but a tillage for the life of the next world. Therefore, do

good here so that you may reap there. For, striving is the ordinance of God, and whatever God has ordained can only be attained through striving.”

In truth, from the perspective of the Sufi path, the kinds of qualities one would seek to establish if one were going to live in this world for a thousand years are precisely the same as those that one would try to acquire if one were going to die tomorrow. However, the only way that both things can be accomplished simultaneously is through learning how to renounce the world and embrace the sort of asceticism that permits one to distance oneself from the world -- as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Free yourselves as much as possible from your worldly concerns.” On another occasion, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “What bond is there between me and the world? I am like a rider on a summer day who takes shelter to rest under the shade of a tree, then, goes on his way.”

The Sufi community of knowers also invites people to give up pride in favor of humility. A common refrain among Muslims is to say: *Al-hamdulillah* - which means: ‘All praise is due to Allah’.

There is a difference between saying this phrase, saying it with sincerity, and living constantly with the realization underlying the Truth of this phrase. The Qur’an reminds us that: “Allah has not assigned unto anyone two hearts within their body,” (6:149), and the heart that we have either can be preoccupied with the praises that the *nafs* sings with respect to itself, or the heart can be preoccupied with the praises that rightfully, and completely, belong to God.

Although the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had the highest condition of spiritual realization, he sought to be nothing but the ‘abd, or servant, of Allah. The Prophet is reported to have said: “Truly, God instructs me to be humble and lowly and not proud.”

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said: “True modesty is the source of all virtues.” In other words, only someone who took to heart -- as the Prophet did -- such Quranic verses as: “O people, you are poor toward God, and God is the Independent, the Praiseworthy,” (35:15) could, by the Grace of Allah, possess the humility and modesty that establishes the foundations for being a true servant of Divinity, and this, in turn, is a key to acquiring all other virtues.

The Qur'an commanded the Prophet to inform people in the following manner: "Say Muhammad: If you love Allah, then, follow me, so that God may love you." (3:31) The Sunnah -- that is, the actions or mode of conduct -- of the Prophet not only have been made sacred by Divinity, but God is telling human beings that the door to God's love is compliance, if God wishes and according to one's capacity, with the model of Prophet behavior -- especially the emphasis which that model gives to the essential importance of humility and modesty.

In addition to inviting human beings to faith, sincerity, asceticism, and humility -- while requesting them to forego, respectively, doubt, hypocrisy, worldliness, and pride -- the Sufi community of knowers also invites people to turn away from enmity in favor of love. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Shall I not inform you about a better act than fasting, charity, and prayer? - making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots."

The Prophet is seeking to turn our attention away from that which is spiritually destructive -- namely, enmity and malice, while, simultaneously, directing our attention toward something that is better than fasting, charity, and prayers. Since fasting, charity and prayers constitute three of the five pillars of Islam, surely, the Prophet is mentioning something of considerable importance.

Consider the following set of traditions that are reported to have been said by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). (1) "You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not complete your faith until you love one another." (2) "If you love your Creator, then, love your fellow beings first." (3) "Deal gently with people and be not harsh; cheer them and do not condemn them." (4) "There is no human being who is wounded and, yet, forgives the giver of the wound, for whom God will not exalt the injured party's dignity and diminish such a person's faults." (5) "Creation is like God's family, for its sustenance is from Allah. Therefore, the most beloved unto God is the individual who does good to God's family."

Taken individually, and collectively, the foregoing Hadiths all are in the same spirit as the previously cited counsel of the Prophet that called upon human beings to forego enmity in favor of love. This teaching is central to the Sufi path.

The Qur'an states: "Those of faith are overflowing in their love for God." (2:165) Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), a close friend and

Companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The sign of attachment with the Beloved is detachment from all else."

To attach oneself to the Beloved is to engage life through a very particular kind of *niyat* or intention. In one Hadith Qudsi, God says, via the voice of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), "The ones who love Me for my sake, deserve My love. The ones who give what comes to them in abundance for My sake, deserve My love. The ones who visit and frequent each other for My sake, deserve My love."

If one obeys Divinity out of desire for Paradise or fear of Hell, one is not loving God for the sake of God. If one gives to others out of desire for fame, community standing, self-image, or heavenly reward, one is not giving for the sake of God. If one visits other people in order to socialize, seek favor, gain influence, or have a good time, then, one is not doing these things for the sake of Allah.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The best of alms is that which the right hand gives and the left hand does not know about." This is not a statement which is in favor of people who are right-handed, nor is it a claim against those who are left-handed.

The symbol of the right hand is used here to allude to those acts which are done with a pure intention -- that is, solely for the sake of God. The symbol of the left hand refers to those actions which arise out of *nafsi-amaara*.

If one lingers too long over pure-intentioned actions, one is providing an opportunity for the forces of *nafsi-amaara* to seep into awareness and compromise, if not exploit, the original intention. The Prophet's counsel is to do things for the sake of God and, then, quickly move on so that the 'left-hand' is not given time to come to 'know about', or be aware of, what is transpiring and, possibly, intervene in a spiritually problematic manner.

Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) who was quoted above, also is reported to have said: "He who tasted of the pure love of God will have no desire for the world and will avoid one and all." At the same time, this close Companion of the Prophet led a balanced life -- he was a husband, father, friend, business person, and member of the community who did not neglect any aspect of his life.

In fact, the quality of his life has resonance with the following saying of a Sufi shaykh: "Love has contracts, so do not violate them, and love has an adab (spiritual etiquette), so do not omit this, and love has rights, so do not abandon them." The primary contracts, adab, and rights of love are with Divinity, but through this love, one honors one's contracts, adab, and rights in relation to all levels of Creation, for the latter is entailed by the former.

By unanimous consensus, the Sufi community of knowers is agreed, as indicated above, that the purpose of life is not to achieve Paradise nor avoid Hell -- however desirable each of these goals might be in its own right. The purpose of life is to realize the full potential of one's spiritual capacity, or *fitra*, since only when this has been accomplished is one fully free to follow the command of the Qur'an to "Devote thyself to God wholeheartedly" (73:8) and, thereby, fulfill the purpose of Creation -- namely, "I have not created human beings nor jinn except that they may worship Me." (51:56-57)

Proper worship requires all of the internal instruments of the human being -- mind, heart, *sirr*, spirit, *kafi*, and *aqfah* -- to be purified, calibrated, tested, activated, and working in harmony with one another. Proper worship of Divinity requires that a special kind of spiritual mirror be prepared through the foregoing processes so that all of the Names and Attributes of God are capable of being reflected by that mirror since, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Only God's Attributes are fit to praise His Essence." Proper worship of Divinity is an alternative way of speaking about the Hidden Treasure that is to be known through such worship, and God is the One Who indicated that this was, indeed, the purpose of Creation.

Whatever differences might exist from one Sufi shaykh to the next, these differences are purely peripheral. There is no disagreement about the basic purpose, nature, requirements, and structure of the Sufi path among this community of knowers.

There is no disagreement in the foregoing areas because the consensus of understanding among shaykhs with respect to such matters has been derived through the standard of replication that exists in relation to the mystical path. In other words, the aforementioned consensus is rooted in a knowledge that arises out of a series of experiences that is tied together through: instrumentation, recursive methodology, objectivity, and a community of knowers in such a manner that these experiences can,

within certain degrees of freedom, be replicated, if God wishes, from person to person, place to place, and era to era.

The reproducibility of empirical results is an important benchmark of modern science. The standard of replication is also at the heart of the Sufi path.

Of course, there are proponents of modern science who would wish to completely alter the nature of mystical science by throwing out relevant empirical data, as well as jettisoning the instrumentation, recursive methodology, framework of objectivity, and standard of replication that constitute mystical science. In addition, modern science would demand that its own approach to empirical data, instrumentation, methodology, notions of objectivity, and standards of replication replace that which has been tossed out.

However, one can no more replace spiritual science with physical science and expect to discover the true nature of mysticism than one can replace apples with oranges and expect to produce an edible apple pie. Moreover, just as apples and oranges both might be fruits, and, yet, one is not the other, so too, the Sufi path and, say, physics both are sciences, but one is not the other.

Physics (or any other modern science) and the Sufi path each stresses the importance of: empirical observation and data; instrumentation; recursive methodology, objectivity; a consensus of understanding produced by, and tying together, a community of knowers; as well as, reproducibility of results. What makes something a science is not its particular subject matter but is, rather, a function of the rigorous standards, values, methods, techniques, requirements, and so on, that can be shared by different people, under a variety of conditions, to generate an understanding that allows those people to interact with the phenomena of experience in a way that has heuristic, predictable results for those people-- both individually and collectively.

Although there might be slight variations of practice from laboratory to laboratory, the process of doing physics is pretty much the same everywhere in the world. Similarly, although there might be slight variations of practice from silsilah to silsilah, or Order to Order, the process of pursuing the science of the Sufi path is largely the same everywhere in the world.

The only major difference is that Sufi science has been adhering to a framework that is scientific in the modern sense -- that is, it gives expression

to all seven of the qualities outlined and discussed earlier -- and has been doing so a lot longer than physics, biology, chemistry, or any of the other physical sciences of today. For, from its inception, the Sufi path has embodied all of the qualities of a rigorous science, but physics and other physical sciences only have begun to do so -- and not all at once -- during the last five hundred years, or so ... and some of these disciplines adopted the approach in question much more recently than did others.

Long before modern physics ever began to even dream of developing a comprehensive, unified theory of the universe -- and it still has not achieved this -- the science of the Sufi path was elucidating principles that outlined how to actually realize such unity ... not in theory but in practice. If an individual sincerely applies himself or herself and seeks to pursue the Sufi discipline under the guidance of an authorized member of a community of knowers, then, certain results concerning states, stations, behavior, goals, values, priorities, understanding, knowledge, identity, and realization will, if God wishes, take place over a period of time.

Some of the results being alluded to above can be discussed openly. Some of them only can be mentioned under appropriate circumstances -- such as during consultation with one's shaykh.

The most important -- and, by far, the most extensive -- of the aforementioned results of the Sufi mystical Path, however, cannot be spoken of at all because they transcend the capacity of language and thought to accurately communicate the nature of such experiences. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Whoever knows Allah curbs one's tongue from speaking since this kind of knowledge cannot be contained in speech."

Nonetheless, when a individual takes initiation with an authentic shaykh, the latter uses his or her spiritual knowledge, understanding, wisdom, insight, states, stations, and unveiling to nurture and cultivate the seed of nisbath that is at the heart of initiation. In other words, a shaykh does not have to say what she or he knows in order to apply that knowledge to assist an individual.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The Shari'ah is my words, tariqah my actions, haqiqah my states, gnosis my capital, intellect the basis of my Deen, love my foundation, passion my mount, fear my companion, knowledge my weapon, forbearance my friend, trust my cloak, contentment my treasure, truthfulness my residence, certainty my refuge, poverty my glory, and by it I attain to an honor

above the rest of the Prophets and Messengers.” The Qur’an instructs the Prophet to inform others: “Say Muhammad: If you love Allah, then, follow me, so that God may love you,” (3:31) and in seeking to comply with the spirit of this Quranic guidance, Sufi shaykhs have attempted--within their capacity to do so, and by means of what God’s Grace permits -- to not only follow the teachings of the just noted Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but, as well, to assist others to inculcate this approach to life’s purpose.

The Sufi path gives expression to a science that, God willing, is capable of producing determinate results. Sufi shaykhs understand the nature of this path because they have traveled that path and done so in an apprenticeship with their own shaykh. Consequently, they are now in a position, if God wishes, to serve as a guide for others who wish to make the journey and, therefore, learn the science of spiritual travel. However, no two people are precisely the same and, in addition, the character of the spiritual journey tends to vary, within certain limits, from individual to individual. Therefore, Sufi shaykhs do not so much make predictions about particular outcomes of this or that ‘experiment’, as much as they show individuals how to become scientists and realize the truths that adherence to the principles of the scientific process help engender, God willing, in the would-be mystical scientist.

At the same time, shaykhs can point to, and tell about, so many ‘case studies’ that demonstrate the capacity of this science or Deen to produce, if God wishes, the kind of determinate results that are predicted when the mystical science of tasawwuf, or the Sufi path, is applied to life. Thus, when the Sufi shaykhs speak about the members of the household of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), or various Companions of the Prophet, or such spiritual lights as: Ra’bia of Basra, al-Muhasibi, the Ghazali brothers, Hujwiri, Junayd, Shibli, Hallaj, Bistami, Hafiz, Qadir Jilani, Muinuddin Chishti, Shams, Rumi, ibn al-‘Arabi, Hazrat Maneri, and thousands more (may Allah be pleased with all of them), the Sufi shaykh is indicating that the promise of mystical science is, God willing, not empty.

## 61 - Taqwa

Page 33 - Chapter Three: "Like the Kalam experts and unlike the philosophers, the Sufis gave pride of place to the Qur'an and the Hadith, but they also held that the only way to understand the revelatory message was to purify the heart so that it would be worthy of being taught by God Himself. They liked to quote the Koranic verse, 'Be wary of God, and God will teach you.' (2:282) Since 'being wary of God (*taqwa*) is designated by the Koran itself (49:13) as the highest human attribute in God's eyes, this verse was a powerful scriptural support for their position."

Commentary: The Quranic ayat to which the author alludes in the foregoing -- but for which no text is included -- does not say that 'taqwa' is "the highest human attribute in God's eyes. The text says that: "surely, the most honorable of you in God's eyes is the one among you most careful (of his duty)." (49:13)

On the one hand, this verse is a direct reference to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) since he is, without any doubt, the 'one' among those to whom the Qur'an is being disclosed, that is most careful of his duty to God and, therefore, the one who has the highest position of honor in God's eyes among human beings. On the other hand, the aforementioned verse also establishes a general principle in the sense that any individual who conducts her or his life in accordance with 'taqwa' toward God -- that is, having a humble, respectful, modest, receptive, sincere, co-operative, appreciative, observant regard for all that comes from Divinity -- will be considered to be most honorable in the sight of God.

Notwithstanding the importance of 'taqwa' as noted above, the purpose of life is not to achieve honor. The goal of life is to realize the fullness of one's spiritual capacity so that one might come to know, if God wishes, the Hidden Treasure that led to Creation being brought forth, and, thereby, worship God in a way which is His right.

One needs to have 'taqwa' in order to achieve life's purpose because God has indicated that the presence of such a quality is a necessary prerequisite for being taught by Divinity. However, this clearly indicates that taqwa is not the destination but an important way-station en route to a further spiritual goal.

In addition to 'taqwa', the seeker, with God's help, also must develop qualities of repentance, patience, trust, gratitude, longing, sincerity,

constancy, dependence, sacrifice, courage, tolerance, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and love. Of course, if one does not have 'taqwa', then, acquiring these other qualities will be very difficult, if not impossible.

In other words, unless an individual deeply feels that he or she has an essential 'duty of care' with respect to the Divine Purpose --and this kind of deep-rooted commitment is at the heart of taqwa -- then, a person is unlikely to struggle toward developing and acquiring those qualities that will help advance the Divine Purpose. Consequently, taqwa is of fundamental importance because it serves as both the doorway to further travel on the mystical path, as well as a staging area for organizing, directing, and helping to underwrite a wide array of spiritual activities.

Nevertheless, the 'highest human attribute' is 'fitra' -- our primordial spiritual capacity. While taqwa is an important expression of this capacity and while taqwa plays a key role in the process of struggling toward realization of the potential inherent in this spiritual capacity, the latter cannot be reduced to the former.

## 62 - Highest Attribute

Page 34 - Chapter Three: “As noted earlier, the Sufis commonly called this direct knowledge of God ‘unveiling’. Partly because unveiling often takes the form of a visionary, imagistic knowledge, they made frequent use of poetry to express their teachings about God, the world and the human soul. Many of them felt that poetry was the ideal medium for expressing the truths of the most intimate and mysterious relationship that human beings can achieve with God, that is, loving Him and being loved by Him.”

Commentary: Although unveiling might, ‘sometimes’, assume the form of “visionary, imagistic knowledge”, the author has not put forth any evidence that would substantiate his claim that unveiling “often takes” such a form. In fact, on the basis of those Sufi shaykhs who have written anything -- and this constitutes a very small portion of the Sufi community of knowers (which the author acknowledged earlier in his book) -- there is little reason to suppose that such spiritual conditions as fana, baqa, gnosis, intoxication, and/or love (all of which involve unveiling) are either a function of images or necessarily must entail images of one sort or another ... although, from time to time, there might be imagery associated with such spiritual conditions that serve as loci of manifestation through which different kinds of knowledge might be given expression in conjunction with that condition.

Ultimately, the mystical path is ineffable. This means that, for the part, spiritual realization cannot be reduced to concepts, language, images, or some combination thereof.

If some individuals chose poetry to communicate certain facets of the Sufi path, this is not necessarily because poetry is “the ideal medium for expressing the truths of the most intimate and mysterious relationship that human beings can achieve with God”. In fact, poetry is language, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Whoever knows Allah curbs one’s tongue from speaking about Allah, since this kind of knowledge cannot be contained in speech”, and, therefore, words -- irrespective of whether they are prose or poetry -- cannot express “the truths of the most intimate relationship that human beings can achieve with God.”

Poetry is a language of metaphor and simile. One uses poetry to allude, to point, to suggest, to remind, and to establish a verbal, rhythmical resonance in relation to some aspect of experience.

The symbols of poetry are access routes to realms of experience too vast to be contained in words. So, a poet does the next best thing: namely, if one can't recreate the experience, then, at least provide something that offers a metaphorical reflection, however fleeting and inadequate, of those facets of experience to which one is seeking to draw the attention of others.

Furthermore, in many-- and, perhaps, most instances -- individuals did not choose poetry because they considered it an ideal medium for expressing truths that, in fact, could not be expressed through language ... and the poets knew this as well as anyone. Indeed, individuals did not choose mystical poetry as much as, in a very important sense, such poetry chose those individuals.

Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him), for example, did not write the *Mathnawi*. He was the locus of manifestation through which the *Mathnawi* was given expression, and the same sort of thing could be said with respect to all of the other, great, Sufi poets.

Mystical poetry consists of so many postcards from the land of the ineffable. Just as a postcard is not the reality that it seeks to depict, so too, mystical poetry is not the reality from whence it arises -- although, like a postcard, poetry provides a limited sense of this or that point of reference.

In the quote, on which the previous commentary (61) was based, the author was trying to maintain that 'taqwa' was the "highest human attribute in God's eyes". Now, the author is claiming that loving, and being loved by, God is "the most intimate and mysterious relationship that human beings can achieve with God".

In point of fact, neither of the author's foregoing contentions is quite correct. The Qur'an indicates that: "God embraces all things in Mercy and Knowledge," (40:7) and, therefore, both taqwa and love are embraced 'in Mercy and Knowledge'.

Love and taqwa -- each in its own way -- give modulated expression to both Mercy and Knowledge. As a previously cited Hadith Qudsi indicates: "I [God] was a Hidden Treasure and wished [or desired or longed or loved] to be known." The desire or wish to be known was an expression of Mercy, and

the Mercy was an expression of knowledge concerning the nature of the Hidden Treasure.

Love and taqwa are important constituents of the process of worship, and worship is the purpose for which human beings and jinn have been created by Divinity. Moreover, worship is embraced by both Mercy and Knowledge.

The Qur'an says: "We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a mercy to all the worlds." (21:107) And, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was instructed to say: "This is my way. I call to God upon insight - I and whoever follows after me." (12:108) ... again, Mercy and Knowledge.

Elsewhere in the Qur'an, God says: "We raise by grades of Mercy whom We will, and over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing." (12:76) 'All things are embraced in Mercy and Knowledge'.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The hearts of all of the children of Adam (peace be upon him) are like a single heart between the two fingers of the All-Merciful, and the All-Merciful twists this heart in whatever way is willed." Yet, this 'willing' is not arbitrary for it is done in accordance with the purpose of Creation that desires that the Hidden Treasure comes to be known to whatever extent the underlying Divine wish permits.

The heart of mankind is a major battleground in the struggle between guidance and misguidance -- two fingers of the All-Merciful. Furthermore, Allah's Mercy is such that Divinity "never changes the Grace that has been bestowed on any people until they first change that which is their hearts, and this is because Allah is Hearer, Knower." (8:53) But, Allah also reminds us: "O My slaves who have transgressed against their own souls! Do not despair of the Mercy of Allah who forgives all sins." (39:53)

Human beings have been constructed with the potential to know whatever portions of the Hidden Treasure that God wishes. Knowledge of God is at the heart of fitra -- that is, our primordial capacity for knowing Divinity -- and we require God's Mercy to realize the possibilities inherent in that capacity.

Consequently, the 'highest human attribute' is our capacity for Divine knowledge. Taqwa and love are both species of such knowledge, but spiritual knowledge extends far beyond taqwa and love.

In addition, the most intimate and mysterious relationship that a human being can achieve with Divinity is to fully realize that one is immersed in the embrace of the All-merciful. Once again, taqwa and love each constitutes a locus of manifestation that gives expression to one's realization of the Presence of the All-merciful, and each of those qualities does so in its own characteristic way, but the embrace of the All-Merciful is far more encompassing than taqwa and love.

63 - Essence

Page 34 - Chapter Three: “Sufi attempts to balance the demands of transcendence and immanence help explain why they are especially fond of paradoxes - statements that express subtle truths by ignoring the law of non-contradiction. These help break down the insistence of the rational mind that everything can be explained and grasped. In fact, God does not fit into our categories. Everything in our world and our experience must be one thing or another, but God is both nothing and everything. He is both near and far, both transcendent and immanent, both absent and present, both this and not this.”

Commentary: The author speaks in terms of Sufi “attempts to balance the demands of transcendence and immanence,” as if they were engaged in some sort of post-facto, rationalized reconstruction of experience. Sufis do not have to accomplish what God already has done -- that is ... balance the “demands of transcendence and immanence”.

The challenge facing an individual does not revolve around any struggle to balance qualities of transcendence and immanence. The task is to understand the nature of the way Reality is.

Thus, the prayer of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is: “O my Lord, show me things as they really are,” and not: ‘O my Lord, help me to balance the demands of transcendence and immanence.’ With unveiling, comes understanding, and, consequently, the issue is one of acquiring knowledge of Divinity rather than learning how to juggle arbitrarily fashioned contradictions.

Transcendence is not an antonym for immanence. Moreover, transcendence is not spatially separated from immanence such that ‘immanence’ is ‘here’ and ‘transcendence’ is ‘over there’ someplace.

Transcendence is removed from us because we have no way of accessing or penetrating that realm or quality. What is transcendent could be imminently near and, yet, it remains opaque to us due to its incredibly august nature -- a nature that is beyond our capacity to grasp, envision, or understand.

When Sufis speak, simultaneously, of both transcendence and immanence, then, contrary to the claim of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, there is no law of non-contradiction that is being ignored. This is so for the following reason.

First of all, as the author correctly points out, one makes a mistake whenever one assumes that God should conform to logical categories. In fact, rationalistic thinking has been making this same error for thousands of years -- namely, projecting its own assumptions, biases, prejudices, categories, and limitations onto Divinity and expecting that the latter should be amendable to being subsumed in accordance with whatever conceptual system one has devised.

In other words, there is absolutely no evidence or argument that warrants a belief that rules of classical logic are appropriate tools for studying Divinity -- as the Qur'an indicates: "They measured not God with the true measure." (6:91). Sufis understand that classical logic (and, actually, modern logic as well) is irrelevant and immaterial to the issue at hand, and, consequently, the application of any of its laws only can lead to confusion, distortion, and misunderstanding.

The author is incorrect when he says that Sufis are fond of paradoxes -- and, certainly, a Sufi shaykh cannot be held responsible if someone, who does not understand what is being said by the shaykh, interprets his or her own ignorance as paradoxical (which it may well be), but this has nothing to do with what a given shaykh has said. In fact, to speak of transcendence and immanence as being simultaneously true, is neither a paradox, nor is it designed to "help break down the insistence of the rational mind that everything can be explained and grasped."

More specifically, to speak of these qualities together is not a paradox because, as noted above, the two qualities --transcendence and immanence -- are not opposites. Furthermore, mentioning these qualities at the same time is not intended as a Zen-like exercise that, if successful, curbs the rational mind's tendency to presuppose that everything can be "explained and grasped".

God, the Independent and the Beneficent, has referred to Divinity in terms of transcendent and imminent qualities. The Sufis are merely reminding others of what God has said.

If God tears back the veils that, normally, render such truths impenetrable, then, an individual comes to understand something of the nature of these truths that are being unveiled as a function both of the precise degree to which the veils are dissolved and, as well, the extent to which one has the requisite spiritual capacity, within the limits of that capacity, to appreciate that which is being unveiled. If, however, the veils guarding

such truths are not removed, then, no insight or understanding concerning them is possible -- logic or no logic.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that "God is both nothing and everything. He is both near and far, both transcendent and immanent, both absent and present, both this and not this." His way of characterizing the situation is, at best, misleading, and, at worst, just plain wrong.

The qualities of transcendence and immanence already have been discussed. The author's understanding concerning these terms is incorrect, and, for the same reasons, his claim that God "is both near and far" also is in error.

An individual might be emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, behaviorally, and conceptually 'distant' from God, but God is always, entirely 'near'. Some facets of this nearness are, if God wishes, accessible, to varying degrees, and other dimensions of that nearness are inaccessible.

Similarly, God is not both "absent and present". God is present -- although a human being might be absent or present with respect to awareness of that Presence.

Finally, the author is wrong when he maintains that "God is both nothing and everything or "both this and not this". In truth, Divinity, in Essence, is neither.

While the assertion --- 'there is no reality but Divinity' -- is true, this is not an expression of pantheism in which the 'things' of the world consist of so many atoms and molecules of God-stuff. The 'things' of the world are the loci of manifestation through which Divine Names and Attributes give expression to the nature of those qualities that constitute 'thingness'.

As previously indicated, the 'things' of the world are like the interference swirls on a holographic 'plate' or tablet in the Divine Imagination. The 'coherent' lights and colors of the Divine Names and Attributes pass through this plate and create a multi-dimensional image that we refer to as this or that kind of 'object' according to the 'potentials' inherent in, as well as the 'angle' of intention by which the coherent light of Divinity passes through, the aforementioned 'plate' or tablet.

The created image is not Divinity and has no permanent reality. Yet, Divinity has made the image possible.

The intention underlying Creation is Divine. However, all that arises out of that cornucopia of Divine Desire is an expression of Creative Imagination that operates in accordance with the Mercy and Knowledge of God that embraces those 'products' of Divine Imagination.

Therefore, these 'products' are forms of Divine knowledge concerning the nature of the original Divine Intention and Purpose that give rise to Creation through the exercise of God's capacity for Creative Imagination. The qualities, properties, nature and potential of any given form of Divine knowledge is a reflection of Divine purpose, but Divine Essence is not reducible to that purpose even while the latter is made possible by the former.

Divinity has equipped that Purpose with all that is needed to fulfill its intent. These are the Names and Attributes, but Divine Essence transcends those Names and Attributes.

There are an infinite number of purposes that can be (or have been or are) devised by Divinity that give expression to this or that possibility inherent in the Hidden Treasure. Even when considered collectively, this infinite set of purposes cannot exhaust, nor be considered synonymous with, the Essence of Divinity -- although, obviously, the latter has made all of the former possible through the exercise of Creative Imagination.

God has given humankind the potential to know the Wish that underlies the bringing forth of Creation. However, we cannot know the Essence that stands behind this Wish.

We have the potential for knowing the Names and Attributes that are present in the Wish. Yet, we can never know the Essence that underwrites the Presence of those Names and Attributes, nor know how the latter are 'written' into the 'fabric' of the Divine Wish or Purpose. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Reflect upon all things but do not reflect on God's Essence."

Consequently, Divine Purpose, the Names and Attributes of God, the nature of Creation, spiritual potential, Divine Law, and so on ... all of these are topics for reflection, but Dhat, or the Essence -- which underwrites the possibilities surrounding, and permeating, all of the foregoing themes -- is off-limits as a subject of reflection.

In short, within the limits of spiritual adab and capacity, we are permitted to reflect on and explore whatever has been made manifest, or

whatever has the potential -- though it be hidden or veiled from us presently -  
- to be made manifest by means of the Divine Desire. That which is manifest  
-- on whatever level or in whatever realm -- gives expression to an array of  
Names and Attributes that, if God wishes, can be accessed (within certain  
parameters established by Divinity ) through one, or more, of the  
instruments of fitra ... that is, our primordial spiritual potential.

Allah is the Name that refers to the Reality that gives expression to the  
collected Names and Attributes of Divinity. As such, this is referred to as  
the Supreme Name of Divinity.

Allah is the Face of the Hidden Treasure that shines through the Intention  
of Creative Imagination from which Creation was brought forth. This Face  
of the Real -- which gives expression to the manifestation of Names  
and Attributes that serve the Wish of the Hidden Treasure to be known --  
can be realized in accordance with Divine Grace and spiritual capacity.

Yet, beyond this Face is the unknowable Essence -- and this, truly, is the  
Reality without a Name. Although we might use nouns like 'Dhat' (Essence)  
as a way of making reference to that which lies beyond the Name of Allah  
(which encompasses all other Names and is the Face through which the  
Intention of the Hidden Treasure is given expression), nonetheless,  
there is no Name, Attribute, or set of Names and Attributes which is  
capable of doing justice to, or providing even a modicum of insight  
concerning, that which is impenetrable, cannot be imagined, and is far, far  
beyond all of our capacities for understanding. Essence transcends that  
which is manifest or will be made manifest. Since our spiritual  
potential is -- in a variety of ways -- receptive to, and sensitive toward,  
Divine manifestation, we have no capacity to access Essence that is  
beyond manifestation, and, therefore, whatever we might reflect upon in  
relation to Essence would be permeated with error and nothing but error.

The Qur'an indicates: "He let forth the two seas. They meet. There is a  
barrier between them. They encroach not (one upon the other)." (55:19-20)

In the context of the holographic model noted previously, the realm of  
fixed forms is analogous to the interference swirls on the plate or tablet.  
These fixed forms have arisen through the flow of Divinity's capacity for  
Creative Imagination.

Fixed forms do not have any existence per se. They are a potential, and  
that potential encompasses the possibilities that, under certain conditions (to

be outlined shortly), give expression to different facets and dimensions of the fixed form's capacity to provide the co-ordinate sets that define the parameters with which any projected image derived from those co-ordinates must comply.

The Divine Names and Attributes are employed by the Divine intention -- that desires or loves for the Hidden Treasure to be known -- in a manner somewhat akin to the way coherent forms of light are directed through a holographic plate. After the 'lights' of the Divine Names and Attributes have passed through the plate, or tablet, of fixed forms, this 'object beam' is reunited, so to speak, with the 'reference beam' of Divine Purpose, and, in the process, an 'image' is projected onto Being through the agency of the Divine Names and Attributes.

The Divine Names and the fixed forms meet. However, neither realm encroaches on the other since fixed forms do not change Divine Names and Attributes in any essential way, nor do the latter alter the former.

Divine Intention is the barrier that prevents any encroachment of one realm by the other. On the other hand, Divine Intention is also that which permits the two seas to meet and, thereby, lead to the projection of an existent image.

Modern scientists have discovered -- although no one really understands why -- that when the light used in generating a holographic image is run through a filter that diffuses light prior to encountering the objects that in conjunction with one another (that is, light and objects together ) will produce an interference pattern that yields far better resolution than when no diffusion filter is used. Similarly, if the potential of the fixed form that constitutes the fitra, or spiritual capacity, of an individual is fully realized, this has an effect that is somewhat akin to a diffusion holograph, since the projected image is capable of serving as a mirror of extraordinary resolution that reflects the lights and colors from all of the Divine Names and Attributes that have passed through the fixed form.

#### 64 - Comprehension

Pages 34 and 35 - Chapter Three: “Many Sufis maintain, in fact, that true understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment. The paradoxical and sometimes scandalous utterances that tend to emerge at this loss of rational distinctions manifest inner awe, wonder, and astonishment. One of the favorite Sufi expressions of perplexity goes back to Abu Bakr, the close Companion of the Prophet and the first caliph after his death - ‘Incapacity to perceive is perception.’

“The Sufis who stress paradox and bewilderment tend to fall on the side of intoxication, while those who speak in more measured terms keep their sobriety. The eye of imagination, unveiling, and gnosis revels in God’s presence and throws away all pretensions to sober judgment and logical precision. The eye of reason knows nothing of God’s presence, because its analytical approach can only dissect endlessly and reach the conclusion that God is nowhere to be found.”

Commentary: In the foregoing quote, the author has translated the statement of Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) as: “Incapacity to perceive is perception.” Others have translated that same statement quite differently.

For instance, some have rendered the assertion as: “The realization of one’s inability to attain comprehension of God is, itself, comprehension.” Others have translated the statement in terms of an ‘awareness’ of one’s inability to comprehend Divinity and that this very awareness is a form of understanding.

Quite frankly, as it stands, the author’s translation does not make a whole lot of sense. Furthermore, the uses to which the author seeks to put that translation make even less sense.

More specifically, he wishes to claim that: “We perceive the things of this world by perceiving them, but we perceive God by the clear perception that we do not and cannot perceive Him.” This way of saying things does fit neatly into the author’s belief that Sufis, supposedly, are fond of paradoxes and, therefore, according to the author, are inclined to utter perplexing statements, but the paradox in question is entirely of the author’s creation and has nothing to do with the Sufi path.

What is meant when someone says: “we perceive God by the clear perception that we do not and cannot perceive Him”? More precisely, what is

the meaning of the first use of “perceive” in such an assertion and how, if at all, does it differ from the use of “perceive” elsewhere in such an assertion?

Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) was not necessarily saying that awareness of our own inability to comprehend Divinity with any semblance of finality or completeness was, itself, perception of Divinity. He was saying, instead, that awareness of the limits of our understanding is, itself, a form of understanding -- a form of understanding that tends to tell us more about ourselves than it informs us about God.

No one -- not even the Prophets or the greatest of saints -- can comprehend God in a complete manner because in order for this to be possible, Divinity would have to be capable of being circumscribed and exhausted, and this cannot be accomplished. The Qur’an has stated: “And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more to help it (were ink), the words of Allah could not be exhausted” (31:27) -- and these are just the words of God ... nothing is being said here about the infinite nature of Divinity beyond the realm of ‘words’.

Nevertheless, while the previously noted statement of Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) might have been an acknowledgment concerning the limits of spiritual capacity, he was not saying that, therefore, even ‘some’ knowledge or understanding of Divinity was an impossibility. After all, at the very minimum, Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) understood some of the significance of what was being referred to when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Whoever knows Allah curbs one’s tongue from speaking about Allah,” since if no knowledge of Divinity were possible, then, the Prophet would not have said what he said.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* also states things in a misleading, if not incorrect, manner when he says: “Many Sufis maintain, in fact, that true understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment.” Just as the author does not provide any specific information to support his contention that “many [my emphasis] Sufis maintain” what he claims they maintain, so too, he fails to provide any specifics concerning how “understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment.”

What kind of ‘understanding’ does the author mean? Are the conditions of perplexity and bewilderment an understanding of

anything but perplexity and bewilderment, and, if not, what is the nature of the spiritual condition to which the terms 'perplexity' and 'bewilderment' make reference?

'Perception', 'understanding', 'perplexity' and 'bewilderment' are, in the context of the author's discussion, devoid of any substantive meaning. Consequently, the paradox being introduced by the author is rooted in an absence of identifiable meaning rather than in the presence of meanings that are clear and capable of reflecting the actual nature of the Sufi path.

There are Sufis who speak about a spiritual condition of bewilderment that marks the highest stage of love and that follows upon, if God wishes, stages of compatibility, inclination, fellowship, passion, friendship, exclusive friendship, ardent affection, and enslavement. However, only those who have experienced this stage actually know what is entailed by the spiritual condition of bewilderment.

Some Sufi shaykhs whom I have known have alluded to the idea that those who are in this spiritual condition of bewilderment are overwhelmed by not only the staggering influx of Divine manifestations that characterize this condition, but, as well, by the fact that no matter how much one comes to know about these manifestations, there are many other facets of such unveiling that one does not understand. Therefore, this stage of spiritual bewilderment consists of a strange juxtaposition of simultaneous knowing and not knowing in conjunction with a plethora of unveiling.

This does not mean that a "true understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment." What the foregoing suggests is the following: (1) there is a spiritual condition known as 'bewilderment' that, contrary to the contention of the author, is not due to the presence of a perceived paradox but has to do with the presence of various overwhelming, but not necessarily paradoxical, facets of the spiritual condition in question; (2) this condition of bewilderment is but one of many modalities through which Divinity might be known, and, therefore, it is neither the "only" way to experience the Presence of Divinity, nor does it constitute "the" true understanding of Divinity -- although this spiritual condition does give expression to dimensions of truth and understanding that are very important to the Sufi path; (3) the spiritual condition of bewilderment is not an acknowledgment that "incapacity to perceive is perception", but, rather, that every spiritual state and station is marked both by that which is known as well as that which falls beyond the horizons of what

is known, and, consequently, however bewildering this spiritual condition might be, the experience of bewilderment is not because there is an absence of knowledge and understanding concerning God's Presence within this condition.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* compounds the foregoing problems when he claims: "The eye of imagination, unveiling, and gnosis revels in God's presence and throws away all pre tensions to sober judgment and logical precision. The eye of reason knows nothing of God's presence, because its analytical approach can only dissect endlessly and reach the conclusion that God is nowhere to be found."

Bewilderment is not a matter of intoxication versus sobriety. An individual who observes the etiquette of sobriety can experience the spiritual condition of bewilderment, but due to the presence of a commitment to adab within such a person, little, if anything, might be said.

A spiritually sober individual is someone who both "revels in God's presence" while, simultaneously, holding onto propriety, logic and judgment. In fact, the 'propriety, logic, and judgment' displayed by this sort of person is actually informed by the understanding, unveiling, and forms of knowing that are manifested through the spiritual condition of bewilderment.

While the author is quite correct that the un-illuminated "eye of reason knows" little, or nothing of God's Presence, nonetheless, when the 'eye of reason' is fed by the light of spiritual illumination, that eye has an awareness of the Presence of Divinity through the experience of the light emanating from that Presence. Moreover, if God wishes, this awareness is enough to induce the 'eye of reason' to make use of, and work in concert with, the understanding and knowledge that is being transmitted through that spiritual condition.

There is a fundamental difference between how the 'eye of reason' operates when it is unsupported and uninformed by illuminations arising out of this or that spiritual condition, and how the same 'eye of reason' functions when it is 'enhanced' through the presence of such spiritual illuminations. Contrary to the implication within the author's foregoing quotation, logic and judgment need not be thrown away when the spiritual condition of 'bewilderment' descends, but, instead, the latter might be used to help increase -- within the limits of potential capacity -- the quality of rational processes like logic, judgment, and/or analysis.

65 - Stages

Page 35 - Chapter Three: "In the frequent discussions of the relative virtues of sobriety and drunkenness, teachers often speak of three stages on the path. Before entering the path itself, most people appear to be sober but are actually drunk. This is blameworthy sobriety, because it grows up from being drunk and deluded by the illusory standards of social reality, the trappings and goals of ordinary life. Such sobriety is a mortal danger for the soul, because it is built on forgetfulness of God and heedlessness of the human situation. When people enter the Path, they reach true sobriety by turning away from the follies of this world and coming to their senses.

"After long struggle on the path of discipline and self-purification, the seekers may be opened up to the effusions of divine love, mercy and knowledge. This can be so overwhelming that they lose their powers of rational discernment and tend to express themselves in ecstatic and paradoxical language. This is the stage of true intoxication, but it is not the final stage of the path. Neither the Prophet nor the vast majority of the great Muslims who followed in his footsteps were drunk. They had reached the still-further stage, "sobriety after drunkenness", which is the return to the world after the journey to God. In traveling to God, the seekers undergo total transformation, but now they come back with helping hands."

Commentary: By the Grace of God, I have been permitted to attend the communal gatherings of Sufis for over thirty years. During this time, I have had the good fortune to be in the presence of different shaykhs, from various Orders and countries, and, quite frankly, the topic of "the relative virtues of sobriety and drunkenness" almost never came up -- although there were a few occasions when, in passing, the issue of sobriety or intoxication might have arisen.

Consequently, I would question the author's use of the adjective "frequent" with respect to discussion of this topic. Furthermore, while the observance of the etiquette of sobriety is a virtue, spiritual intoxication is not a virtue even though it does give expression to the manifestation of Divine Grace.

In order for something to be considered a virtue, one must be capable of doing other than what is virtuous. Thus, an individual who is observing the etiquette of sobriety either has had an experience of spiritual

intoxication, or is currently experiencing such a condition, or both, and, therefore, is in a position to transgress the boundaries of propriety with respect to the secrets of an intoxicated condition.

This individual might do other than comply with the requirements of sobriety, but, as long as the person acts in accordance with the adab of sobriety, then, such on-going observance is, by the Grace of Allah, virtuous in nature. However, the condition of spiritual intoxication differs from the foregoing situation in a number of ways.

To begin with, intoxication is a condition or state of Divine bestowal. One can neither initiate it nor terminate it of one's own volition.

Because the issue of choice has been removed from the equation, one is not in a position to do other than be spiritually intoxicated. Since one cannot do other than this, one cannot speak of the condition, in and of itself, as entailing virtue -- albeit, the person undergoing the experience might, by the Grace of God, be a virtuous individual in other aspects of her or his life.

Secondly, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* has characterized the matter in a misleading manner. More specifically, the issue is not about the "relative virtues of sobriety and drunkenness". The observance of sobriety's etiquette, as well as the condition of spiritual intoxication, are both, in and of themselves, expressions of God's Grace, and, indeed, the former encompasses the latter because there can be no sobriety where there is an absence of an associated condition of intoxication -- either in the present or at some point in the past.

The problem that, on occasion, arises in conjunction with the condition of spiritual intoxication lies with giving verbalization to the nature of this condition. In other words, the issue is not the condition, per se, but, rather, the problem revolves around speaking about that condition in a manner that discloses secrets of Truth being unveiled through such a condition.

The author's current way of characterizing the issue is to set sobriety in opposition to intoxication and, as outlined above, this is incorrect. Moreover, while there have been a few isolated sentences in his book which suggest that he knows this is not the correct way to engage the matter, nonetheless, more often than not, he has given readers the impression that there is a problem with the spiritual condition of intoxication, or that those who are in such a condition are alleged to be at odds

with the people of sobriety, when the only problem involves voicing “certain” secrets that might arise during the condition of spiritual intoxication.

The word “certain” has been highlighted in the preceding paragraph in order to draw attention to a distinction that is implicit in the foregoing -- namely, between those aspects of Truth that are, for a variety of different reasons, secretive in nature and those dimensions of Truth that might be inspired, insightful, and profound, but are not necessarily a secret. This distinction is important to make because Sufi shaykhs sometimes speak to their mureeds, or students, from the perspective of spiritual intoxication, but this instructional discourse is filtered through the etiquette of sobriety so that inspired teaching might take place in a context of propriety.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* claims that "teachers often speak of three stages on the path. Before entering the path itself, most people appear to be sober. This is blameworthy sobriety, because it grows up from being drunk and deluded by the illusory standards of social reality, the trappings and goals of ordinary life. Such sobriety is a mortal danger for the soul, because it is built on forgetfulness of God and heedlessness of the human situation. When people enter the Path, they reach true sobriety by turning away from the follies of this world and coming to their senses."

Aside from manifesting another instance of the author's penchant for using terms like "often"(or "frequently" and "many") in the absence of any substantiating evidence that would warrant the presence of such terms, his foregoing quote contains a variety of problematic features. For example, he says that "before entering the path itself, most people appear to be sober but are actually drunk."

In doing this, his statement alters the original referential meanings of “sober” and “drunk” Sobriety no longer refers to those individuals who are inwardly experiencing a condition of spiritual intoxication, while outwardly observing a concomitant etiquette, and “drunk” no longer refers to a condition of spiritual intoxication.

Switching referential frameworks like this seems to lend itself, all too easily, to creating unnecessary confusion in the minds of readers. Although the author does say that this sort of sobriety is only apparent and is, in reality, a state of drunkenness induced by attachment to the material world and social norms, and although he does say that this kind of sobriety is, supposedly, known as "blameworthy sobriety", nonetheless, there is a degree of adulteration in meanings that has been introduced which is problematic.

According to the author, the reason why the “apparent” sobriety is really a matter of drunkenness is because the individual who is in this condition of “blameworthy sobriety” is someone who is “deluded by the illusory standards of social reality, the trappings and goals of ordinary life.” Now, the author doesn’t specify what “illusory standards of social reality” he is talking about, nor does he indicate what he means by the phrase: “trappings and goals of ordinary life,” but whatever he might mean, what he is saying is misleading if not incorrect.

Someone might comply with various standards of social reality or participate, in limited ways, with the “trappings and goals of ordinary life” without necessarily buying into the associated belief systems or without becoming excessively entangled in trappings and goals. If an individual does not want to create social, political, or legal difficulties for herself or himself, a person tends to learn, from an early age, that one has to comply, in some minimal fashion, with the standards, trappings, and goals of a given culture.

An individual might be ignorant of spiritual possibilities without necessarily being drunk with the world. Furthermore, a person might be very dissatisfied with the “standards of social reality” of a given society, or fed-up with the “trappings and goals” of that culture, and, yet, not know what else to do, or where else to go, or what else to try -- and this state of affairs does not at all reflect the author’s characterization of the sort of “blameworthy sobriety” that actually is drunkenness.

In fact, although there are exceptions to the following “rule-of-thumb”, those individuals who are “drunk”-- in the author’s foregoing, altered sense -- often are not likely candidates for the Sufi path. Unless some anomalous event or soul-wrenching experience occurs in the life of a person who is thoroughly entangled in illusory standards as well as the trappings and goals of ordinary life, then, generally speaking, they have no reason or motivation to look for anything else.

The Qur’an informs us: “And whoever is blind in this world, will be blind in the Hereafter, and even further from the path.” (17:72) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “People die in the state in which they live, and they are raised up in the state in which they die.”

Thus, those who live in a condition of worldly inebriation tend to die in that condition and, subsequently, will be raised up in that condition. Unless God intervenes, these people tend to be both spiritually blind in this world as well as being even more blind in the Hereafter.

The Qur'an indicates: "Have you seen him who has taken his caprice to be his god, and Allah sends that person astray purposely, and seals up that individual's hearing and heart, and sets a covering on his sight." (45:23) These are the people who are inebriated by their own nafs, or the whisperings of Satan, or the overtures of those who have no faith, or the pastimes of "ordinary life", and, consequently, they are unlikely, under "normal" circumstances, to have any inclination toward seeking a life of spirituality -- but, if God wishes, this could change.

Although -- like Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) --there are instances in which an individual might not be actively looking for God, but, God, nonetheless, is actively courting that person, many people, prior to setting foot on the Sufi path, might be quite disillusioned with, or uninterested in, the standards, trappings and goals of "ordinary life". These people tend to be restless -- even if they are not quite sure what they are looking for or what will assuage their restlessness -- but they are seeking something beyond the standards, trappings, and goals of "ordinary life".

Quite frequently, seekers are people who would agree with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he is reported to have said: "Every person who rises in the morning either does that which will be the means of one's redemption or one's spiritual ruin." Yet, they aren't sure what will lead to redemption and what will lead to spiritual ruin.

Such people are not so much "blameworthy" as much as they are in need of guidance. They have a seriousness of purpose, but their purpose, as well as the means to realize that purpose, are only very diffusely, if at all, defined.

In short, a spiritual seeker, who has not stepped onto the mystical path in any formal way, is not necessarily "drunk" in the manner in which the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains is the case. To be sure, there might be some who are in this latter condition of worldly addiction but, by the Grace of God, nevertheless, find their way to an authentic spiritual guide (or vice versa), but these individuals do not necessarily constitute the "norm" of people who, eventually, step onto the Sufi path.

Furthermore, there are individuals who might eventually step onto the Sufi mystical path who are not only are un-enamored with the standards, trappings and goals of ordinary life, but they also might be very serious about pursuing a life of exoteric spirituality. In other words, these people try to live their lives in accordance with their understanding of the

requirements of Islam, and this understanding might exclude, for any number of reasons, the esoteric, or mystical dimension of Islam.

Later on, these individuals might meet a Sufi shaykh, or read a book about the Sufi path, or have some sort of spiritual experience, and, as a result of one, or another, of such possibilities, these people become, by the Grace of God, more receptive to, and interested in, the Sufi path. Whereas, previously, these sorts of individual might have been opposed to the Sufi path, or wary of it, or merely uninformed, they begin to see that the esoteric dimension of Deen is not antagonistic to the exoteric facet of Deen but complementary to it.

These sorts of people do not reflect the description that the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* gives in the previous quote. More specifically, they are not "drunk" with the world, nor is their life "built on forgetfulness of God and heedlessness of the human situation"... although they might be ignorant of, or misinformed about, the actual nature of the Sufi path.

The author goes on to contend that: "When people enter the Path, they reach true sobriety by turning away from the follies of this world and coming to their senses." Just as the author is incorrect with respect to his characterization of people's condition prior to entering the path, he also is incorrect with respect to what happens after someone steps onto the path.

Initiation is an opportunity, not a guarantee. Not everyone who takes initiation necessarily travels very far on the Sufi path, and of those who do travel, not all of them realize the journey's purpose. Furthermore, there are some individuals who might undergo the process of initiation into a Sufi silsilah, yet, subsequently, lose their spiritual bearings and go astray.

Consequently, while there are initiates who develop spiritual discernment concerning the world or the "trappings and goals of ordinary life", there also are initiates who might not acquire this discernment. These latter people never really turn "away from the follies of this world" -- although they might distance themselves, to varying degrees, from those follies -- and, therefore, these people might not come to their spiritual senses in relation to the nature and purpose of life.

Moreover, even with respect to those people who, by the Grace of God, develop some degree of spiritual discernment concerning the world and, as a result, reorder their priorities, goals, values, commitments and

activities, this is not necessarily the same thing as sobriety. As indicated in an earlier commentary, sobriety presupposes spiritual intoxication -- one cannot observe the etiquette of sobriety unless one is experiencing, or has experienced, a condition of spiritual intoxication to which such etiquette is applicable.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* closes out his tripartite discussion of sobriety and intoxication by maintaining that: "After long struggle on the path of discipline and self-purification, the seekers might be opened up to the effusions of divine love, mercy and knowledge. This can be so overwhelming that they lose their powers of rational discernment and tend to express themselves in ecstatic and paradoxical language. This is the stage of true intoxication, but it is not the final stage of the path."

In truth, whether, or not, an individual ever experiences a condition of spiritual intoxication, the initiate who has sincerely struggled "on the path of discipline and self-purification" has, by the Grace of Allah, been "opened up to the effusions of divine love, mercy and knowledge" throughout the journey. Indeed, spiritual struggle, discipline and self-purification cannot take place except through gifts of Divine love, mercy, and knowledge that have been transmitted via various loci of manifestation -- most notably, the shaykh.

Moreover, the nature of the Divine gifts that might be bestowed on an individual need not arrive only 'after' a long struggle. Sometimes, Divine magnanimity might be manifested in various palpable ways -- such as with a condition of spiritual intoxication -- early in an individual's spiritual journey, and such gifts help inspire, comfort, and sustain an individual during subsequent stages of the journey when there might be an absence of these sorts of experience.

However, in those cases where spiritual intoxication does transpire, then, whether, or not, secrets are disclosed during that condition might have more to do with the individual's understanding of, and/or degree of commitment to, spiritual etiquette than with the intensity level of the condition being experienced. Furthermore, while some people might shout, gesture, or move vigorously during this condition, those instances in which someone might express themselves in "paradoxical language" are -- to whatever extent they happen at all -- very atypical.

Sometimes, nothing at all might be said. For example, one Sufi saint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about whom I know, used to wave a handkerchief when,

during sessions of Sama or audition (Qawwali), his condition of spiritual intoxication was particularly intense. Another Sufi saint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about whom I know, would, on occasion, flow to the floor, like a liquid running through the hands of those who were aiding him, while his spirit reached escape “velocity” during a condition of spiritual intoxication.

There is no evidence to indicate that such people have lost their capacity for "rational discernment". Nor can one suppose that because someone shouts, gestures, or moves vigorously during a condition of spiritual intoxication, this constitutes evidence of an absence of "rational discernment" -- although, clearly, a powerful experience is present.

Of course, the author is primarily interested in those instances where someone in a condition of spiritual intoxication supposedly utters something of a paradoxical nature. Yet, even in these sorts of cases, one cannot be certain that rational discernment is absent.

An individual might be aware of what is going on but be unable or unwilling to terminate what is being said. For example, there is some evidence to indicate that while Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) was aware that the phrase: "Ana'l Haqq", was being said through him, nonetheless, for unknown reasons, he would not, or could not, stop the utterances.

In fact, if Hazrat Hallaj (may Allah sanctify his soul) lacked mental competency, then, under Shari'ah, this would have been a mitigating circumstance that, in all likelihood, should have called for some legal remedy for the situation other than the death penalty. However, when Hazrat Junayd (may Allah sanctify his soul) was, finally, forced to make a pronouncement on the matter, nothing was said to indicate that the accused was suffering from some sort of mental disease or an incapacity with respect to rational discernment.

In any event, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is attempting to make a mountain out of mole hill when it comes to the condition of spiritual intoxication. There are many more instances of intoxication without problematic ramifications than there are controversy-laden instances of this condition.

Even in those cases of the latter, potentially problematic kind, there often is insufficient evidence in such instances to corroborate the author's contention that whatever problems might be present in this kind of situation,

ensue from a loss of "rational discernment". Moreover, as suggested above, if there is a loss of such discernment, then, the person who says something in a state of diminished capacity cannot legally be held accountable for what is said and, as such, the matter becomes a non-issue.

The author refers to those cases in which people "tend to express themselves in ecstatic and paradoxical language" as giving expression to "the stage of true intoxication." This contention is incorrect on several levels.

To begin with, as pointed out previously, there are many individuals who, if they say anything at all, never utter anything paradoxical or controversial while in a condition of spiritual intoxication. The implication of the author's foregoing statement is that these cases do not exemplify "the stage of true intoxication" because they don't satisfy his criterion for such a stage -- namely, the utterance of paradoxical statements.

The problem, however, does not lie with the spiritual condition of those people who do not satisfy the author's criterion. The problem lies with the arbitrary and unwarranted nature of the author's definition concerning "the stage of true intoxication".

Secondly, the author is wrong to suppose that all instances of spiritual intoxication are, more or less, the same thing. There are many different levels and varieties of spiritual intoxication.

For example, the individual who, by the Grace of God, enters into a temporary condition of spiritual intoxication while listening to Qawwali (sacred music), is not necessarily undergoing the same kind of experience as someone who, by the Grace of God, experiences an on - going condition of spiritual intoxication while traversing a particular phase of the spiritual journey. Similarly, the nature of the latter kind of spiritual intoxication is not likely to be the same as that of someone who has completed the journey to full realization of fitra or essential spiritual capacity.

To note just one difference between the spiritual intoxication of one who is a "traveler" on the Sufi path versus the spiritual intoxication of someone who has "arrived" at that path's destination, one might indicate that in the former case (i.e., that of the "traveler") an individual might have to be taken out of a condition of spiritual intoxication in order for continued spiritual progress to have, God willing, an opportunity to occur.

In such a case, intoxication represents an obstacle to further spiritual realization, and if an individual is not brought out of that condition, there is a danger the individual could become 'stuck' in that condition and, consequently, all further spiritual development would be arrested.

In the case of the individual who has, by the Grace of God, 'arrived' at the destination of the spiritual journey, spiritual intoxication -- which is a condition of knowledge and not just ecstasy -- is a fruit of the arrival rather than just being indicative of a way station along the path. As is indicated in the Qur'an: "We raise by grades (of Mercy) whom We will, and over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing." (12:76)

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "Neither the Prophet nor the vast majority of the great Muslims who followed in his footsteps were drunk. They had reached the still further stage, "sobriety after drunkenness", that is the return to the world after the journey to God. In traveling to God, the seekers undergo total transformation, but now they come back with helping hands."

One is uncertain as to the identity of those whom the author has in mind when he speaks about "the vast majority of the great Muslims who followed in" the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), so one can't say much, one way or the other, about their condition vis-a-vis spiritual intoxication. Moreover, the author is being very presumptuous to try to make claims about what the interior spiritual condition of these unspecified, but great Muslims, might, or might not, have been like.

There are those who have "tasted" spiritual intoxication, and there are those who have "imbibed" spiritual intoxication, and there are those who have "drowned" in spiritual intoxication. Anyone who has experienced a condition of spiritual intoxication -- whether through tasting, imbibing or drowning -- carries the 'mark' of that experience with them and that 'mark' colors, shapes, orients, and informs all subsequent understanding.

No one has, or had, a greater spiritual station than the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Prophet had counseled believers to "die before you die", and can there be any doubt that the Prophet knew from direct, personal experience what it meant to drown in the Divine ocean of love, and, therefore, die before he passed away from this earthly realm?

A previously cited Hadith Qudsi goes to the heart of this matter. God is reported to have said, via the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

"He who seeks Me, comes to find Me;  
And, he who comes to find Me, comes to know Me;  
And, he who comes to know Me, comes to love Me;  
And, he who comes to love Me, that person I slay;  
And, the one who is slain is owed blood-money;  
And, I am the recompense for him to whom blood-money is owed."

The Prophet sought God, found God, knew God, loved God, was slain by God, and, therefore, God became the recompense for the Prophet. This all transpired before Muhammad (peace be upon him) passed away from the material plane of existence.

There were times when "Ayesha, the wife of Muhammad (peace be upon him), found the Prophet in a spiritual condition in which the latter did not recognize her and did not even know who Muhammad (peace be upon him) was. She became so unsettled by this sort of occurrence that she spoke to her father, Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), about the matter.

When informed about this incident, her father smiled and told her not to worry. He further elaborated that he had, himself, also encountered the Prophet while the latter was in such a condition.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* has absolutely no grounds upon which to base his speculations about the interior spiritual condition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Was the latter spiritually intoxicated or wasn't he? - Allah knows best.

However, irrespective of whether, or not, at any given time, the Prophet was in such a condition, there can be no doubt that he had tasted, imbibed, and been drowned in the deepest part of the Divine Ocean of Mercy and Knowledge. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that all of these experiences dyed his understanding in a permanent fashion.

The author speaks about the foregoing as an instance of "sobriety after drunkenness that is the return to the world after the journey to God." Yet, as

previously indicated, not all conditions of intoxication are necessarily indicative of having completed "the journey to God".

Sobriety refers, in part, to the etiquette that is observed in relation to any, and all, instances of having experienced spiritual intoxication -- whether through tasting, imbibing or drowning. People who "return to the world after the journey to God" represent a special case of those individuals who have drowned in a condition of spiritual intoxication, and, consequently, not all individuals who observe the etiquette of sobriety after intoxication are necessarily people who have completed their spiritual journey.

The author adds: "In traveling to God, the seekers undergo total transformation, but now they come back with helping hands." Actually, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) possessed, by the Grace of Allah, "helping hands" throughout his life.

The difference from one spiritual stage to the next, and from one spiritual station to the next, is not a matter of whether, or not, there are helping hands, but, rather, the kind of "helping hands" that are manifested. All along the Path of Deen, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was, and is, a locus of manifestation for giving expression to the helping Hands of Divinity -- as is indicated in the Qur'an: "You did not throw when you threw, but God threw," (8:17) and "Those who swear allegiance to thee swear allegiance, in truth, to God. God's hand is above their hands." (48:10) "Nor does he (Muhammad) speak of his own accord." (53:3)

What is true with respect to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is true, in an analogous fashion, with respect to everyone. The differences are a function of spiritual capacity, degree of realization, and the role that Divinity has assigned to an individual in the Tablet of Destiny.

66 - Fana/Baqa

Pages 35 and 36 - Chapter Three: "The two higher stages of this tripartite scheme - that is, 'intoxication' and 'sobriety after intoxication' - correlate with the famous expressions fana' and baqa', or 'annihilation' and 'subsistence.' Through the journey of self-purification and devotion to God, the travelers reach a stage where they become fully open to the divine light, and the brilliance of this light annihilates all the human limitations that had held them back from seeing their true selves and their Lord. The annihilation of obstacles and impediments allows them to see that they themselves had been nothing and still are nothing because God alone has true reality. Instead of themselves, who had never had any reality to speak of, they now see what subsists after the annihilation of idols and false selfhood. What remains is precisely God in His glory, and this glory demands the shining of His light. According to Rumi's interpretation of Hallaj's scandalous utterance, this is the agent that he said, 'I am the Real.'

"The terms annihilation and subsistence are derived from the Koranic passage, 'Everything upon the earth is undergoing annihilation, but there subsists the face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving.' (55:26-27) The specific divine name with which this verse ends - "Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" - is especially appropriate in the context of the spiritual journey, because it alludes to the two-sided perception of things that needs to be achieved. God is the 'Possessor of Majesty.' because He is Great, Distant, Wrathful, Vengeful, King, and Transcendent. His majesty and splendor are such that they annihilate the reality and existence of everything else. Only He is truly worthy to exist. But God is also 'Possessor of Generous Giving' because He is Loving, Merciful, Compassionate, Gentle, Clement, Kind, and Nurturing, and He does nothing but give generously to His creatures. Although His majestic Reality annihilates the creatures, His generous bestowal gives them a new reality and true subsistence."

Commentary: Contrary to the contention of the author, "The two higher stages of this tripartite scheme -- that is, 'intoxication' and 'sobriety after intoxication'" do not correlate with 'fana and baqa' - that is, 'annihilation' and 'subsistence.' As pointed out in a previous commentary, there are many varieties of spiritual intoxication, and not all of them are indicative of the condition of fana.

In fact, there need not be any intoxication associated with fana at all. This latter condition is marked by the Presence of Divinity, as well as by the eclipse of self-consciousness, and, consequently, depending on how the spiritual capacity of the individual is engaged by that Presence, there might be no condition of intoxication that arises out of that engagement.

An overwhelming astonishment, wonder, awe, humility, perplexity, and/or an intense sense of sacredness might be felt rather than intoxication. Or, the individual might be so lost in the Divine Presence that there is no specific, concomitant feeling, emotion, or thought -- there is just Presence.

In the last commentary mention was made of those times when the spiritual condition of the Prophet was such that he had no awareness of who his wife 'Ayesha (may Allah be pleased with her) was, or who his close friend and Companion, Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), was, or who even he, Muhammad (peace be upon him), was. While one cannot automatically assume the Prophet was in a condition of fana at such times, nevertheless, these kinds of occurrence do indicate there are spiritual conditions of nearness to Divinity in which even though one's sense of personal identity might be extinguished, along with one's capacity to recognize near and dear ones, the individual is not necessarily in an intoxicated state.

The available descriptions do not indicate that the Prophet was in a state of ecstasy during such occasions. Moreover, at such times he was able to use language in a rational way because when addressed in certain ways by 'Ayesha (may Allah be pleased with her), he would ask: "Who is 'Ayesha?, or "Who is Muhammad?"

Just as there are many conditions of intoxication that do not necessarily indicate the Presence of fana, so, too, there are many instances of so-called 'sobriety after intoxication' that do not entail baqa. As indicated in several previous Commentaries, sobriety refers, in part, to the adab or spiritual etiquette concerning outward comportment during times of spiritual intoxication or in relation to hiding any secrets of Truth that might have arisen during a condition of intoxication, and, therefore, the condition of baqa constitutes, at most, a very special case of sobriety.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "Through the journey of self-purification and devotion to God, the travelers reach a stage

where they become fully open to the divine light, and the brilliance of this light annihilates all the human limitations that had held them back from seeing their true selves and their Lord." This perspective contains a variety of errors.

As spiritually elevated as the condition of fana might be, it does not mark the end of the path, and, therefore, one cannot say, as the author has in the opening quote, that fana represents a stage where an individual has become "fully open to the divine light." Beyond fana is baqa, and until the potential of an individual's 'fitra', or primordial spiritual capacity, has been fully realized, a person cannot be said to be fully open to the light of Divinity -- or, at least, as open as is humanly possible for a given spiritual capacity.

Secondly, "the journey of self-purification and devotion to God" is not the cause of fana. The journey is, at most, a necessary prerequisite -- although Divinity can, if so desired, dispense with even this necessity.

Self-purification and devotion are the activities of a field worker who takes as given that, among other things, a seed already has been planted, as well as that a variety of processes involving fertilization, cultivation, sustenance, and crop management already have been, or are being, performed through the agency of the shaykh. The field worker's job is to pull the weeds, ward off potentially destructive infestations, and be of service in whatever ways might be indicated by the overseer of the fields.

All the really important work of bringing a seed to fruition is done by someone else. In fact, even in the case of the few tasks that are assigned to a field worker, the latter must be trained to do these tasks properly.

Just because someone works the fields, there is no guarantee that a seed which has been planted will yield fana. This requires great good fortune.

Moreover, irrespective of whether this spiritual condition arises, the job of a spiritual worker is to tend the fields and leave the rest to Allah. Therefore, a worker does not so much reach a certain stage as much as work of different kinds is done and, if God wishes, certain potentials inherent in the work are brought to fruition.

Thirdly, the author is incorrect when he maintains that: "the brilliance of this light annihilates all the human limitations that had held them back from seeing their true selves and their Lord." More specifically, contrary to the implication of the author's assertion, fana does not involve an individual's seeing her or his 'true' self. Fana is about the rising of the

luminous Presence of Divinity and the eclipse of awareness concerning anything else -- including the self, whether authentic or false.

The true nature of the 'self' is realized through the spiritual condition of *baqa*. Indeed, that which subsists in *baqa* is, by the Grace of God, the individuality of the person's true, essential Self.

The subsistence of this sense of individuality is one of the great gifts of Divine generosity. This gift gives expression to the realization of the Divine Intention -- namely, for something of the Hidden Treasure to be known through the instrumentality of a fully developed, harmoniously operating, and Self-aware 'fitra'.

In addition, the Divine Presence that appears in the spiritual condition of *fana* does not annihilate human limitations through the brilliance of Its light. Instead, when Divinity unveils its Presence, the latter renders human limitations and obstacles irrelevant. The Presence is--in spite of those limitations and obstacles and not because the latter have been eliminated.

Divine Presence takes away the breath of our sense of self-awareness. All attention and awareness is preoccupied with Divine Presence -- not because the individual no longer exists but because one loses interest in a 'self' of limitations and obstacles while in the unveiled Presence of Divinity Who is without limitations or obstacles.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "The annihilation of obstacles and impediments allows them to see that they themselves had been nothing and still are nothing because God alone has true reality." Like the quoted passage that precedes the above quotation, there are a number of fundamental problems contained in, and entailed by, the author's perspective.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Every child is born according to primordial nature (*fitra*), then, the child's parents make that person a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian." Contrary to the assertion of the author in the foregoing quote, whatever the nature of 'fitra' is, that to which the Prophet alluded in the cited Hadith, is not "nothing".

Of course, given that Allah, alone, has reality and existence, we are faced with problems of language and conceptual systems trying to get a hold on just where 'fitra' fits in. In order to address this issue, people sometimes speak

in the conceptual language of 'possibility', 'potentiality', 'non-existent fixed forms,' and so on.

The label that one puts on 'fitra' is far, far less important than the 'place' that 'fitra' holds within Divine Intention and Purpose. For, whatever the essential nature of that 'place' might be, it is not nothing - rather, 'fitra' is that which has tremendous importance within the context of the reason for Creation - namely, the knowing of the Hidden Treasure.

Dhat, or Divine Essence, already knew the Hidden Treasure. However, through a Desire or Wish of Essence, this Hidden Treasure was, within limits of Divine discretion, to become known by that -- i.e., Creation -- which was to be brought forth and from which the Treasure would remain hidden except when some dimension of that Treasure was given expression through manifestation.

Divinity bears witness that 'fitra' is not "nothing". For example, consider the following verses of the Qur'an.

"We created not the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in play." (44:38) "Lo! We have placed all that is on earth as an ornament thereof, that We may try them -- which of them is best in conduct." (18:7) "The life of the world is but a pastime and a game. Lo! The home of the Hereafter--that is life, if they but knew. (29:64) "And We test you by evil and good by way of trial." (21:35) "And surely We shall test you with some fear and hunger and loss of wealth and lives and crops, but give glad tidings to the steadfast -- who say when misfortune strikes them: Surely, to Allah we belong and to Allah is our returning." (2:155-156)

Everything has been created for a Purpose, and the nature of that Purpose is not an idle, frivolous one. All that has been placed on earth is a trial through which the quality of conduct is tested.

The life of this world is but a prelude to the true life of the Hereafter. The good or evil through which we are tested in this life are signs that we belong to God, and to Divinity, we are returning.

Nowhere in the Qur'an does one find verses indicating that Creation or humankind is "nothing". Nowhere in the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) does one find evidence suggesting that Creation or humankind is "nothing".

To be sure, human beings are caught up in a variety of illusions and delusions that incline them to treat life as a game and something for which

they will not be held responsible with respect to the manner in which they conduct themselves. As the Qur'an indicates, all too many people "know but the outer part of the present life, and of the Hereafter, they are heedless. (30:7)

Yet, Creation, the life of this world, trials, tests, the Hereafter, and the returning, all operate in accordance with a Purpose that does not exist as a game, or sport, or in jest, or as play. In short, Creation is not for "nothing" , nor does the potential role for which humankind is destined constitute "nothing".

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* trivializes the Purpose of Creation when he speculates that, after all is said and done, the ultimate realization is for humankind to come to know we are nothing and that God, alone, is Real and Something. The implication of the author's perspective is that God is engaged in a Divine prank in which despite the fact that clear, contrary indications run through Revealed Books, the lives of the Prophets, and the teachings of Sufi shaykhs, nevertheless, according to the author, if we are lucky, then, we will find out that we are nothing, and that we never had any spiritual potential -- except to realize our nothingness, and that God, for unknown reasons, has decided to share the Hidden Treasure with 'nothing'.

Presumably, according to the author, when the nature of the Divine joke dawns on 'nothing', this 'nothing' becomes intoxicated with amusement at the whole prank -- and how 'nothing' becomes intoxicated is both a miracle and mystery. However, in an effort not to give away the ending, the intoxicated 'nothing', somehow, agrees to maintain outward sobriety so that the secret of this joke won't be spoiled for those 'nothings' who don't, yet, get it.

The issue at the heart of the foregoing is not a matter of trying to exalt humankind in a manner that transcends God's Intention. Instead, the point at issue involves pointing toward the subtle, artful, creative, rich, layered, complex, mysterious, and miraculous nature of God's Purpose -- a Purpose that is denigrated and trivialized when the role of humankind is rationalized away as 'nothingness'.

To say that God had something other than 'nothingness' in mind, so to speak, when human beings were created, does not alter the fact that Divinity, alone, is real. In a Hadith Qudsi, God is reported to have said, through the agency of Muhammad (peace be upon him): "I am Ahmad without meem

(an Arabic letter that corresponds to the English 'm'). In another Hadith Qudsi, God says, via the Prophet: "In the beginning, I was alone."

God is still alone. Ahmad -- which is one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- without 'meem' is 'Ahad, and this is a Name of God ... the One.

However, the fact God, Himself, is making a distinction between Ahmad (peace be upon him) and Ahad is important. Ahad, alone, exists and has Its own Reality, but Ahmad (peace be upon him) is central to the Purpose underlying Creation.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The first that God Almighty created was the light of my spirit." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "I am from the Light of God, and the whole world is from my light." This is known, variously, as the Muhammadan Reality, or the Muhammadan Light, or the First Intellect.

From the light of the Prophet's spirit, the light of the spirits of the other Prophets were created. Thus, the Prophet is reported to have said: "I was a Prophet when Adam was between clay and water."

Subsequently, humankind issued forth from the line of genetic transmission generated through Adam and Eve (Peace be upon them both). Yet, to one degree or another, all human beings carry within them -- as, indeed, does all of Creation -- something of the Muhammadan Reality or Light. Thus, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Adam and those after him are beneath my banner."

The light of the spirit of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the First Intellect that reflects the Divine Knowledge inherent in the Purpose of Creation. The quality of Mercy that encompasses the Divine Purpose is also given expression through the Prophet since the Qur'an indicates: "We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a mercy to all the worlds."

Thus, human beings, in essence, give expression to Divine Light. This Light has been shaped into various modalities, or forms, in accordance with the Knowledge and Mercy that encompass the Divine Purpose or Intent.

While human potential is clearly derivative from, and dependent on, Divinity, it is not 'nothing' Instead, one might refer to human beings as a sort of 'smart chip' that is woven from Divine Light.

Much of the 'circuitry' for this smart chip has been pre-programmed or hard-wired into human nature. Yet, there also are elements of the 'chip' that are receptive to a variety of programmable options.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* goes on to say: "Instead of themselves, who had never had any reality to speak of, they now see what subsists after the annihilation of idols and false selfhood." The author never explains what he means by the phrase "never had any reality to speak of", and the absence of such an account leaves a fundamental problem for his position -- namely, just what is this "they" which "now see what subsists after the annihilation of idols and false selfhood?"

Not only has the author confused fana with baqa in the foregoing, by claiming that "they now see what subsists [my emphasis] after the annihilation of idols and false selfhood", but the author fails to provide any details concerning how 'nothing' sees or witnesses or is aware during the spiritual conditions of either fana or baqa. If 'nothing' is truly 'nothing', then, there is nothing there to see or witness or be aware or experience, and, consequently, the conditions of fana and baqa are spiritually empty -- except in the sense that God 'now' knows what He knew all along in the infinite NOW.

Moreover, if nothing is truly nothing, then, how does 'nothing' acquire "idols and false selfhood"? And, why would God even bother to 'annihilate' that which never existed? ... must be one of those paradoxes that the author claims Sufis are so fond of.

The author concludes his paragraph by maintaining: "What remains is precisely God in His glory, and this glory demands the shining of His light. According to Rumi's interpretation of Hallaj's scandalous utterance, this is the agent that he said, 'I am the Real.'" Why should it be scandalous when 'nothing' reveals the truth to some other 'nothing'? Furthermore, if the Glory of God is what remains - and all that ever existed - then, in relation to what, exactly, does "this glory demands [my emphasis] the shining of His light"? - especially, given that there was never a time when such a light was not shining.

One also might raise a question with respect to the author's contention that following annihilation "what remains is precisely God in His glory". In other words, 'glory' is only one dimension of Divinity.

Much more than 'glory' remains, so the author is unnecessarily restricting his focus when he uses just that term. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, said that Glory is His lower garment and Majesty is His cloak, and Allah says: 'He who contends with Me in regard to them, I shall cast that person into Hell-fire'.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "The terms annihilation and subsistence are derived from the Koranic passage, 'Everything upon the earth is undergoing annihilation, but there subsists the face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving.'" (55:26-27)

That which is perishing is manifestation. The Qur'an indicates that: "Each day God is upon some task," (55:29) and a day demarcates the length between the rising and setting of any given manifestation.

The Face of Divinity, alone, subsists. From the reality of this subsistence, Creation is made possible, and this Divine subsistence is what underwrites the 'days' of manifestation that appear and perish in accordance with the tasks inherent in the Divine Purpose.

The Names of Divinity mark the Ground or Screen on which, or through which, manifestations make their appearances. When the Divine task that is being expressed through a given manifestation has been completed, the manifestation perishes.

The 'day' of the fixed forms that constitute human potential --that is, the 'smart chip' that Divinity has woven from Light -- has a beginning, but the Divine Intent has set no terminal point. The starting point of that 'day' is the point of Creation being brought forth.

When various dimensions of a human being's potential are given manifested expression via the agency of Divine Names, these manifestations come and go according to the character of the 'day' required to serve the task of God that is inherent in such manifestations. Nonetheless, the underlying fixed form remains across manifestations, just as a holographic plate remains stable even though the kinds of image being projected from it might change as the angle of incidence of light passing through that plate is altered.

The spiritual condition of fana does not annihilate the underlying fixed form -- a form that constitutes the potential or capacity of a human being, and out of which (by means of the inducement of Divine Names)

manifestations arise that comprise the 'objects' of human experience. Rather, fana constitutes, yet, another kind of 'day' giving expression to a Divine task that unveils Divinity to the consciousness of an individual.

Fana cannot take place independently of a given fixed form. After all, the awareness of an individual -- which is part of the potential of the underlying fixed form -- is what undergoes the condition of fana.

As long as this unveiling continues, so will its concomitant 'day. During the light of this 'day', there are certain kinds of manifestation that disappear from awareness, and the absence of such modalities of awareness makes it seem that everything but the Divine Presence has been annihilated.

However, as noted previously, the fixed form that comprises the potential of a human being is still present. Indeed, when the Names of Divinity are cast through this fixed form in a certain manner, then, the spiritual condition of fana arises.

At the end of the Quranic ayat previously cited by the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, is the phrase: "Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving." If the author is correct, and human beings are, ultimately, 'nothing', then, to whom, or what, does the 'Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving' give?

In truth, the Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving bestows grace and bounty upon the fixed forms of Creation. As the Qur'an indicates: "If you were to enumerate the favors of Allah, you could not count them," (14:34) and "Which is it, of the favors of your Lord that you and you deny?" (55:13)

Among the favors bestowed on the fixed form potential of a human being is a capacity for awareness of the manifestations, or objects of experience, that are generated when, on the days of those manifestations, "God is upon some task" (55:29). In addition, the fixed form potential that constitutes a human being has been given a capacity for niyat or intention, and through the manner in which intentionality engages the 'objects' of awareness that are correlated with Divine manifestations, patterns of choice are established that affect that dimensions of spiritual potential are given expression.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that: "The specific divine name with which this verse ends - "Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" - is especially appropriate in the context of the spiritual journey, because it alludes to the two-sided perception of things that needs to be achieved. God is the 'Possessor of Majesty' because [My emphasis] He is Great, Distant, Wrathful, Vengeful, King, and Transcendent. His majesty and

splendor are such that they annihilate the reality and existence of everything else. Only He is truly worthy to exist. But God is also 'Possessor of Generous Giving' because [My emphasis] He is Loving, Merciful, Compassionate, Gentle, Clement, Kind, and Nurturing, and He does nothing but give generously to His creatures. Although His majestic Reality annihilates the creatures, His generous bestowal gives them a new reality and true subsistence."

God is not the 'Possessor of Majesty' 'because' [My emphasis] of anything. The 'Possessor of Majesty' is not a function of being Great, or Wrathful, or Kind, or Transcendent, or any combination of these Names.

The 'Possessor of Majesty' is a Name apart from the other Names. Every Divine Name has Its own unique character and quality, and no Name is derivative from, or dependent on, any other Name.

Similarly, God is not the 'Possessor of Generous Giving' 'because' [My emphasis] of other Names of Divinity. The 'Possessor of Generous Giving' is a Name that is distinct from the Divine Names that give expression to being "Loving, Merciful, Compassionate, Gentle, Clement, Kind, and Nurturing".

Furthermore, contrary to the author's implication in the foregoing quote, God does not exist because "only He is truly worthy to exist". God's Being is an expression of the capacity of Reality and not worthiness -- although, to be sure, "all praise is due to Allah".

Manifestations appear and disappear as expressions of one, or another, of the Divine tasks that are being served through the days of manifestation. In other words, manifestations serve the Divine Purpose or Intention underlying Creation and this fact, in and of itself, makes manifestations worthy of being given expression.

Of course, the Qur'an reminds us that: "If Allah were to take humankind to task for their wrong-doing, God would not leave here on a living creature, but God reprieves them to an appointed term." (16:61). The One Who is the 'Possessor of Majesty' also possesses control over the appearance and perishing of all manifestation and, thereby, has the capacity to set the appointed term of a manifestation's 'day'. At the same time, the One Who is the 'Possessor of Generous Giving' reprieves until that appointed term.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is incorrect when he asserts "His majesty and splendor are such that they annihilate the reality and

existence of everything else." As pointed out previously, manifestation is what perishes.

Fixed forms do not have the same sort of 'reality and existence' as do manifestation. The former persist as one species of Divine Knowledge generated through God's exercise of Creative Imagination, while the reality and existence of manifestation are woven from the 'fabric' of Divine Names and constitute another dimension of Divine Intention concerning Creation.

It is not God's Majesty and Splendor that annihilate the 'reality and existence' of manifestation. Divine Purpose establishes the length of day for any given manifestation, and, then, this or that Divine Name serves the underlying Intention and, at the appointed term, a given manifestation disappears.

In the case of the spiritual condition of fana, Divine Intent is unveiled in the form of a Presence that so dominates the consciousness of an individual that 'normal' sorts of manifestation disappear from awareness. The 'days' of the latter kinds of manifestation either have been placed in suspension, disrupted, or banished, but, if God wishes, will continue again at a later time either as a continuation of the previous day's mode of manifestation or as new days that give expression to similar kinds of manifestation.

When the 'regularly scheduled programming' for a given set of 'days of manifestation' is lost from awareness, and, then, later on, once again, becomes available to the consciousness of an individual who, previously, had been in a condition of fana, this renewal of the appearance of manifestation is not what constitutes the spiritual condition of baqa or 'true subsistence' -- although it does give expression to Divine generosity.

Baqa revolves around the realization of one's essential identity and unique spiritual capacity. Baqa is the gift of individuality that Divinity bestows on the lucky ones such that these people reside continuously in an awareness of Divine Presence but do so with a simultaneous awareness of oneself as a unique servant of God who is now completely able to worship Divinity in a way that fulfills Divine Purpose -- that is, to worship Divinity by knowing (within the limits of individual capacity and what God ordains through the bestowal of Grace) the Hidden Treasure. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Only God's Attributes are fit to praise His Essence."

Baqa does not necessarily automatically, or immediately, follow the spiritual condition of fana. The two conditions are different stages of the journey, and how closely together they occur, or if they occur at all, is up to Divinity.



67 - 'Upon His Form'

Pages 36 and 37 - Chapter Three: "In other terms, annihilation results from the negation asserted in the first half of the first Shahadah, and subsistence from the affirmation mentioned in the second half. 'No god' demands that all of the positive qualities and characteristics that are ascribed to creatures be negated from them, because in truth these do not belong to them. 'But God' means that God alone can be affirmed as real so every positive attribute belongs only to Him. When the travelers reach the perfection of their own capacity created in God's image, they experience nothing but the negation of egocentric, separative reality and the affirmation of God-centered, unitive reality.

"In contrasting subsistence and annihilation, we need to remember that subsistence is real, not annihilation, for subsistence is the affirmation of an ancient reality, but annihilation is the negation of something that never truly was. 'No god' negates all false realities, and 'but God' affirms the subsistence of the Real. In terms of the divine attributes, this means that the mercy that designates God's presence and sameness dominates over the wrath, so mercy and subsistence have the final say, not wrath and annihilation."

Commentary: The author's characterization of the Shahadah is both misleading and incorrect. Contrary to the contention of the author, the first half of the Shahadah is a bearing witness that 'there is no reality but Divinity', while the second half of the Shahadah involves bearing witness that 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God'.

As previously pointed out in an earlier commentary, there is no negation in the first half of the Shahadah -- just affirmation. The Reality of the Divine Presence is the standard through which one discerns Truth from falsehood and identifying that which is false presupposes having access to what is true.

The first half of the Shahadah does not demand "that all of the positive qualities and characteristics that are ascribed to creatures be negated from them". Instead, the first half of the Shahadah addresses the need for human beings to bear witness -- and, thereby, come to realize -- the actual nature of Reality.

The beginning of understanding is to realize that all truth issues from one and only one Source -- namely, Divinity. Unless, and until, one is prepared,

at a minimum, to bear witness and accept the nature of this starting point, then, one cannot proceed along the path of Deen.

The author never appears to ask himself the following questions. If a human being is something that “never truly was”, then, how does that which “never truly was” come to ascribe positive qualities to herself or himself? If a human being is something that “never truly was”, then, what is the nature of the ‘capacity’ alluded to by the author when he speaks of individuals reaching “the perfection of their own capacity created in God’s image”? Moreover, what is the nature of the ‘perfection’ of something that “never truly was” coming to realize that one’s ‘capacity’ is to never truly to have been, and how does something that “never truly was” realize anything at all?

These questions are not paradoxes or tricks of language. Such questions, however (questions which, unfortunately, the author never raises nor addresses in his book) do allude to mystical possibilities that are far more subtle, amazing, and profound than anything that is being suggested by the author.

More specifically, given the truth of the first half of the Shahadah -- that ‘there is no reality but Divinity’ --what is the significance of the second half of the Shahadah ... namely, to ‘bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah’? If there is no Reality but Divinity, then, who is Muhammad (peace be upon him) and why is there a need for a Messenger?

The author mentions a “capacity created in God’s image.” Although the wording is not the same, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “God created Adam upon His own form.”

There are a number of key terms in the foregoing Hadith --namely, ‘created’, ‘upon’ and ‘form’. These terms require a certain amount of elaboration.

The Reality of Divinity is, among other things, original, uncreated, independent, and absolute. The ‘reality’ of a human being is derivative, created, dependent and relative.

To say that a given ‘reality’ is derivative, created, dependent and relative, does not make the entity at issue something that “never truly was”. Instead, the nature of the latter is specified as that which presupposes a more fundamental level of Being in order to have status as even a delimited modality of ‘reality’.

Through Creative Imagination, Divinity generates, or creates, a modulated 'piece' of Knowledge. The character of the modulation determines the qualities and parameters of the 'piece' of Knowledge that has arisen through Creative Imagination.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "God created His creation in darkness, and, then, scattered His Lights over them." Consequently, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of cyber-space (in which 'inhabitants' are generated through the modulation of 0s and 1s) the 'creatures' of Creative Imagination are woven from darkness and light.

Earlier a Hadith was cited in which the Prophet indicated that Glory is the lower garment of Divinity and Majesty is the cloak of Divinity. In other words, the 'form' of Divinity is given expression through the Names and Attributes of God.

The angels had been witness to the Divine fashioning of the human being. When they saw certain potentials being placed in man, they inquired of God -- not rebelliously but in perplexity: "Art Thou fashioning one who shall cause corruption and bloodshed?" (2:30). Yet, Allah responded by saying: "Surely, I know that which you do not know." (2:30)

A little later, the Qur'an states: "And God taught Adam all the Names..." (2:31) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "I have been given all the Names and have been sent to perfect good conduct." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Allah has 300 Attributes, the one who acquires just one of these Attributes for one's own character will inherit Paradise."

What Allah knew, but the angels did not, was that the fitra, or spiritual potential, of human kind is equipped with the ability to reflect, under appropriate conditions, the Divine Template or Form. If this were not true, then, Adam (peace be upon him) -- and, by implication, the rest of humanity-- could not give, or reflect, back to God the Divine Names ("O Adam! Inform them of their Names" -- 2:33) which God originally had taught to Adam (peace be upon him), nor would good conduct have been possible to be brought, God willing, to maximum fruition-- in the form of acquiring Divine Attributes according to one's spiritual capacity --through the assistance of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Ultimately, to bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah is to affirm that he -- along with the entire Prophetic

tradition, as well as the heirs of that tradition -- has been sent to, God willing, help people, experientially and knowingly, realize the full meaning of the fact that there is no reality but Divinity and how creation fits into that Truth.

When the Divine Presence of *fana* descends, nothing is negated. However, falsehood does disappear -- "The Real has come and the unreal has vanished away. Lo! Falsehood is ever bound to vanish." (17:81)

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: "In contrasting subsistence and annihilation, we need to remember that subsistence is real, not annihilation, for subsistence is the affirmation of an ancient reality, but annihilation is the negation of something that never truly was." However, the author's way of stating things is incorrect.

Annihilation is every bit as real as subsistence, for annihilation is nothing but subsistence cloaked in manifest forms that perish. Manifestation exists and disappears through the Will of Divinity, and the exercise of Will gives expression to the Presence of the Subsisting One that is experienced differently depending on whether one's spiritual condition is *fana* or *baqa*.

Furthermore, the author is wrong when he maintains that: "subsistence is the affirmation of an ancient reality". *Baqa*, or subsistence, is the realization of a Present Truth -- a realization and Truth that is permeated with knowledge concerning the purpose of Creation.

What is primordial is the potential or capacity for such realization. Indeed, precisely because this potential has a reality -- created, derivative, dependent, and relative though this might be -- rather than "something that never truly was", there is something (namely 'fitra') that, God willing, can be brought to fruition.

The author closes out his section on annihilation and subsistence by claiming that: "In terms of the divine attributes, this means that the mercy that designates God's presence and sameness dominates over the wrath, so mercy and subsistence have the final say, not wrath and annihilation." In truth, although all Names and Attributes of God indicate Divine Presence -- not just Mercy -- the author's use of the word "sameness" in the foregoing quote is problematic.

God is not the 'same' as Creation even though the former makes the latter possible. Similarly, participating in an awareness, according to capacity, of Divine Presence does not make such awareness the same as the

latter -- although, clearly, the former is derivative from, and dependent on, the Presence of Divinity.

The mirror is not the Reality that is reflected. Yet, Reality, mirror, and reflection are intimately tied together since Reality is the One Who has fashioned the mirror and its capacity to reflect.

In addition, contrary to the contention of the author in the previously cited quote, *Baqa*, or subsistence, does not have "final say". *Baqa* is a spiritual condition whose realization is dependent on a bestowal of immense Grace through Divine Will.

Moreover, annihilation is not an expression of Divine wrath but, rather, of Mercy. Manifestation appears and disappears to serve the purpose of Creation, and the Divine Intention inherent in the Purpose underlying the spiritual condition of *fana* is one in which Mercy has priority since realization of the Divine Presence only can take place when the days of manifestation that usually preoccupy consciousness disappear or perish.

Both *fana* and *baqa* are expressions of Divine Mercy -- as well as expressions of Generosity, Love, Kindness, and many other Names and Attributes of Divinity. Nonetheless, each of these spiritual conditions only occurs by Allah's leave.

This is not, as the author suggests, a matter of Mercy versus Wrath. Instead, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Whoever finds good, then, let that person praise Allah, and whoever finds other than this, then, let that person blame no one but himself."



### 68 - The Path

Page 37 - Chapter Three: “Although sobriety represents the highest stage of the Sufi path, this does not imply that the sober are no longer drunk. What it means is that the true Sufi, having realized fully the pattern and model established by the Prophet, is inwardly drunk with God and outwardly sober with the world. Of course, the joy of intoxication may occasionally appear outwardly, but the sobriety of discernment remains a necessary concomitant of faith. The world is the domain of doing what is right and proper, and this needs to be established in terms of a clear distinction between do’s and don’ts. Observing the necessary distinctions demands sober awareness of our actual situation in the world and society.”

Commentary: The author is incorrect when he says that “sobriety represents the highest stage of the Sufi path.” As has been noted on several previous occasions, there are many kinds and levels of intoxication, and irrespective of the kind or level of intoxication present in a given spiritual condition, anyone who has experienced, or is experiencing, such a condition is under an obligation or duty with respect to the adab or etiquette of sobriety.

To observe the requirements of the aforementioned adab requires, among other things, commitment, sincerity, propriety, and self-discipline. Nonetheless, despite the need for exercising these kinds of qualities, the observance of this adab does not necessarily mean an individual has achieved the “highest stage of the Sufi path” since regardless of whether the nature of the spiritual intoxication one experiences is ‘high’ or ‘low’, one still will be required to practice the etiquette of sobriety.

The author also is incorrect when he suggests sobriety means “that the true Sufi, having realized fully the pattern and model established by the Prophet, is inwardly drunk with God and outwardly sober with the world.” The errors inherent in this sort of characterization are several.

To begin with, to speak of a “true Sufi” is both misleading and, as well, involves redundancy. More specifically, the idea of a “true Sufi” implies there is such a thing as a ‘false Sufi’, when, in truth, there are people who are sincere about the Sufi path and there are people who are not sincere toward the esoteric dimension of Islam.

Someone who has sincerity concerning the Sufi path might be at one or another station of the spiritual journey, and such an individual might make

this or that mistake along the way. Yet, regardless of a traveler's spiritual condition and irrespective of the mistakes that might be committed by this sort of person, nonetheless, what qualifies an individual as either being on, or off, the path is the presence of some minimally necessary degree of, on the one hand, sincere niyat, or intention, and, on the other hand, nisbath (i.e., an individual's spiritual link with an authentic shaykh and the underlying silsilah, or spiritual lineage).

Furthermore, to be a Sufi, one needs, through the Grace of God, to spiritually travel on the path. This travel might be slow or fast, problematic or relatively easy, error-filled or characterized by only sporadic mistakes, but there must be movement, of some kind, along the Path.

Someone who is not on the path in the foregoing sense -- that is, as a traveler with some minimally necessary degree of sincere intention and nisbath -- is not a false Sufi. Instead, that person is not a Sufi of any kind.

An individual who takes initiation but who has neither the requisite degree of sincere intention nor nisbath to help underwrite, God willing, some degree of spiritual travel is not a Sufi. Rather, such an individual is an initiate.

Initiation is not the line of demarcation that allows one to identify someone as being a Sufi. Initiation is just the doorway to the path, and once a person, by the Grace of Allah, has been given entry to this path by means of initiation, the individual actually must make efforts and struggle with the opportunity that has been extended to him or her.

In the Qur'an one finds, "Be helpers of God." (61:14). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "This life is but a tillage for the next, therefore, do good deeds here that you may reap benefits there -- for, striving is the ordinance of God, and whatever God has ordained can be attained only by striving."

The way to 'help' God is through struggling with the character and quality of the niyat, or intentions, underlying the actions of striving.

Thus, neither the exoteric nor esoteric dimensions of Islam can be realized except through, God willing, this kind of striving, and as far as the Sufi path is concerned, if there is an absence of striving, then, although the person might be an initiate, this individual is not, yet, a Sufi, since travel and striving go hand in hand on the spiritual journey.

Alternatively, the line of demarcation for identifying someone as a "true Sufi" is not a matter of whether the individual is, or is not, fully realized. Any

individual who has been initiated by an authentic shaykh, and has some minimal degree of sincere intention as well as nisbath concerning the path, and is engaged in some form of striving and travel with respect to this 'Way', is a Sufi.

Therefore, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is incorrect when he suggests, by implication, that a "true Sufi" is someone who has "realized fully the pattern and model established by the Prophet." In fact, the Qur'an indicates that: "God charges a soul only to its capacity' (2:286), and this refers not only to areas of responsibility or duty, but, as well, to spiritual potential.

The task of an individual is not to become the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) nor is it to realize "fully the pattern and model established by the Prophet" -- for both of these tasks are completely, absolutely, and irrevocably beyond our spiritual grasp. Instead, the task of an individual is -- over time and through the Grace of God -- to inculcate the teachings of the Prophet in accordance with one's spiritual capacity to do so.

The author also is incorrect when he claims that a true Sufi is someone who "is inwardly drunk with God and outwardly sober with the world." There are some accomplished travelers of the path who have risen, by the Grace of God, to the highest spiritual echelons but who have neither experienced intoxication nor have they undergone any 'mystical' experience along the way.

While the goal of Deen, or spiritual praxis, is to realize one's primordial capacity, the nature of Deen, in and of itself, is not about spiritual realization. Deen is about purification, cleansing, and preparing the individual to be in a position to receive -- if, and when, Divinity wishes to confer -- blessings of this or that state, condition, or station.

The measure of 'distance' traveled on the path is not a function of the quantity or quality of mystical states or conditions experienced by an individual. Spiritual progress is determined by the extent to which one becomes fully ready, in accordance with one's capacity, to participate in the Divine Purpose.

The Qur'an states: "I have not created human beings nor jinn except that they may worship Me." (51:56-57). In a previously cited Hadith Qudsi, God states: "I was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be known, so I brought forth Creation."

The proper way to worship Divinity is only realized through knowledge of the Hidden Treasure. This knowledge gives expression to both the means of how to worship Divinity, as well the 'Object' of worship.

The key to the 'how' of worship, as well as the 'Object' of worship is contained within the potential of fitra -- or our essential, primordial, spiritual capacity. Yet, in order to access this 'how', we must be capable of being receptive, or open, to knowledge concerning the quintessential nature of worshipping That (i.e., the Hidden Treasure) which is to be worshiped, and to do this we must truly be what we have the spiritual capacity to be -- without impediments, distractions, impurities, or obstacles.

Spiritual stations such as: repentance, longing, patience, dependence, gratitude, fear, and even love are all preparatory in nature. These stations might have mystical experiences associated with them, but such experiences are not necessary conditions of these stations.

Consequently, an individual might travel, God willing, through all of the aforementioned stations and acquire a deep, rich, abiding faith and understanding concerning the collective and synergistically interacting teachings of each of these stations. Nonetheless, this person might not have had one, overt, mystical experience, nor ever been brought into a state of intoxicating ecstasy at any point during the time of traversing these stages and stations.

The defining issue of mystical science or methodology is not a function of certain sorts of anomalous or 'otherworldly' experiences. The sine qua non of the mystical path is arriving at a point where all necessary and requisite processes of purification and preparation have been successfully completed, by the Grace of God, so that one's spiritual potential is ready to receive -- according to its inherent capacity -- whatever Divinity wishes to disclose of the Hidden Treasure.

Therefore, the experiences of Divine disclosure, unveiling, realization, fana, baqa, tawhid (unity), and so on, must be considered separately from the issue of spiritual preparation. Whenever God wishes, the former might take place, but irrespective of whether, or not, they do occur, the preparation must go on -- experiences or no experiences.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Be careful concerning the vision of a mu'min (person of deep faith) because that person sees by the Light of Allah." When an individual, who

is a mu'min, sees by the Light of Allah, must one suppose that this person, necessarily, is aware, in some mystical manner, of what is going on with her or his vision and that unless this kind of awareness is present, then, the individual cannot see by the Light of Allah?

The answer to this question is, of course, no. Divinely inspired 'vision' does not need to arrive on the wings of mystical experience -- although, from time to time, this might be what does, in fact, take place.

Similarly, there are many kinds of spiritual understanding, insight, and wisdom that can frame, shape, orient, and color individual phenomenology, without necessarily there being any sort of mystical 'aura' that surrounds or permeates an individual's Divinely inspired understanding or insight. In other words, spiritual understanding -- like vision -- is not a function of mystical experiences even though, as God wishes, some manner of mystical experience or condition of awareness might accompany a Divinely inspired understanding or insight.

Unfortunately, many people, including the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, confuse mystical experience with the path and, oftentimes, either reduce the latter to the former or make the path a function of mystical experience. As a result, the esoteric way often becomes primarily identified as a source of extraordinary or anomalous experiences rather than as a source of preparation for receiving knowledge leading to, or concerning, the 'how' and 'Object' of proper worship -- that is, the kind of worship that was at the heart of Divinity's original Intention and Purpose concerning Creation with respect to the Hidden Treasure.

The author often uses the phrase "outwardly sober with the world" in relation to those who are experiencing on -going spiritual intoxication, while observing the concomitant adab or etiquette concerning the concealment of whatever Divine secrets might be disclosed through such intoxication. Generally speaking, when the author uses the foregoing phrase, he is alluding to processes involving both compliance with the "do's and don'ts" of Shari'ah or Divine Law, as well as reliance on rational discernment with respect to judgments about how to proceed in the world.

In truth, spiritual intoxication is not just an expression of joy or ecstasy. This condition also contains experiential currents of understanding, insight, and knowledge. One's heart and spirit soar with the unveiled Presence of some dimension of Divine manifestation, but through

this Presence, truth concerning the nature of Reality also is being dispensed.

Consequently, when a spiritually intoxicated individual is “outwardly sober with the world”, this entails more than just a recognition of, and compliance with, what the “do’s and don’ts” of sacred law are. The depth and intensity with which Shari’ah is engaged by such an individual permits the nature and purpose of Divine Law to be understood from a variety of spiritual perspectives, and on a number of different levels, as something more than a codex of rules.

A Sufi shaykh is reported to have said that one of the purposes of the Sufi path is to enable an individual, God willing, to come to understand Shari’ah in an essential way. The implication here is that prior to spiritual realization, a person’s grasp of, and insights into, Divine Law are quite limited.

In truth, the surface rules of Shari’ah (the so-called “do’s and don’ts”) are rooted in a framework of deeper spiritual principles, and, in turn, these latter principles, are nurtured by the Divine Intention and Purpose underlying the reason for which Creation was brought forth. An individual of spiritual realization understands, if God wishes, how Shari’ah is linked to that original Intention, whereas a person who is complying with the various ‘do’s and don’ts’, for purposes of attaining heaven and/or avoiding hell, is veiled from such understanding.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Everyone of you is a guardian, and everyone of you shall be questioned about that which you are guarding.” Since the most fundamental expression of Shari’ah is, God willing, to realize ‘fitra’ or primordial spiritual potential, then, that which we have been entrusted to guard is none other than ‘fitra’.

We are not guardians of Islam. Instead, we are guardians of that for which Islam was given as a means of creating space within which to realize the essence of Shari’ah -- namely, the amanat or trust of ‘fitra’.

The Qur’an states: “O Mankind! There has come to you a direction from your Lord, and a healing for the diseases of the hearts, and a guidance, and a mercy for the Believers.” (10:57) The direction, healing, guidance and mercy that come from our Lord all have outer (exoteric) and inner (esoteric) dimensions.

The surface forms of Shari'ah -- that is, (a) the voicing of Shahadah, (b) five-times-a-day-prayers, (c) fasting during the month of Ramadan, (d) the paying of zakat or charity, and (e) going on Hajj or Pilgrimage -- help to establish 'space' within which the seed of 'fitra' might be cultivated. However, the process of establishing such spiritual space and the process of cultivating the seed of fitra are not synonymous processes -- although, clearly, they have a complementary relationship.

Some of the differences between establishing 'space' and cultivating 'fitra' can be demonstrated in the following manner. For example, when someone takes the first step of submission through declaring the Shahadah, then, truly, "The one whose breast God has expanded unto Islam enjoys a light from one's Lord," (39:22) but this form of bearing witness is only the first step of a very long journey during which, if God wishes, one might come to understand, at some point, the depths of meaning contained within the Shahadah.

When one, by the Grace of Allah, voices the Shahadah, one is wading along the shallows of an 'Ocean without shores'. When one, by the Grace of Allah, comes to realize the meanings inherent in the Reality to which the full Truth of Shahadah gives expression, one has drowned in that same Ocean. Wading and drowning are not the same thing.

Or, consider the matter of the five-times-a-day prayers. These are important because as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Between a person and apostasy, there is only the giving of Salat (formal, ritual prayers)." Furthermore, the Qur'an indicates that "surely (ritual) prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil" (29:45).

However, the Qur'an continues on to state that: "certainly the remembrance of Allah is the greatest." (29:45) In other words, as crucial as ritual prayers might be in helping to protect an individual against various forms of indecency and evil, there are issues beyond ritual prayers -- such as zikr, or remembrance of Allah -- which are even greater and more important than ritual prayers.

The observing of ritual prayers might be an additional modality of bearing witness to the Shahadah that extends beyond the initial verbal declaration that marked the beginning of struggling toward submission, but coming to a realization of the full significance and meaning of Shahadah requires more than saying ritual prayers. Ritual prayers help to create a space of protection against the probing fingers of indecency, evil, and

apostasy, but there are other activities, beyond prayers, that need to be done within the space that has been cleared through compliance with the Pillars of Islam if an individual's essential role in the Purpose of Creation is to be realized.

Similarly, with respect to another Pillar of Islam, the Qur'an states: "Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you that you may ward off evil. (2:218) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Whoever has fasted with Iman (faith) and Ihtisah (trust in Divine recompense), that person's previous sins will be forgiven." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Everything possesses a door, and the door of worship is the fast."

Like ritual prayer, fasting is a means of warding off evil and obtaining forgiveness. In fact, these two Pillars of Islam lend mutual support to one another and, thereby, help enhance the defenses that are intended to continue to help maintain and keep open, God willing, spiritual space so that such space is relatively free from intrusions by destructive forces that can undermine and interfere with more essential spiritual activities.

Nonetheless, warding off evil and being forgiven for previous sins are, to a very large degree, purely defensive measures. Realizing the Purpose of Creation by fulfilling, God willing, the potential of 'fitra' involves a different, though related, set of processes that are constructively proactive with respect to an array of spiritual activities that involve much more than being just defensive or protective in nature.

The dikes of Holland might keep out the sea, and, thereby, create space within which a culture has an opportunity to develop. However, building a country requires something more than just holding back the sea -- and the same is true of realizing the potential of 'fitra'.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Allah has not enjoined zakat (obligatory charity) except for the reason that the rest of your wealth is cleansed through it." Thus, as is the case with the previously discussed Pillars of Islam (i.e., bearing witness, saying prayers, and fasting), the purpose of zakat -- at least, from the perspective of the one who gives -- is to cleanse the wealth one has and, in so doing, remove obstacles that might interfere with spiritual progress.

Nevertheless, purifying one's wealth is only a pre-requisite for struggling to realize the spiritual potential of 'fitra'. In other words, the latter

is best pursued when as many impediments as possible, to a spiritual engagement of life, have been removed so that one's efforts will not be compromised by the sort of problems that tend to be present when one does not employ the means provided by God -- namely, the five basic Pillars -- to create a 'safe' area within which to pursue the essence of life.

From an Islamic point of view, one of the primary functions of a community is to create conditions that are conducive to the peaceful pursuit of spiritual realization across a spectrum of different spiritual capacities. So too, from an Islamic perspective, one of the primary functions of the Pillars of Islam is to help establish conditions -- within both the individual, as well as, the larger collective -- which afford people an opportunity to strive toward participating, as fully as one's spiritual capacity and God's Mercy permit, in the Purpose of Creation.

However, creating spaces conducive to the establishment of spiritual opportunity is not the same thing as taking steps to take advantage of such an opportunity. Moreover, keeping alive the spirit of opportunity involves different processes than does realizing the purpose of that spirit.

With respect to Hajj, the Qur'an says: "Pilgrimage to the House (of Allah) is a duty human beings owe to God -- those who can afford the journey." (3:97) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "The best and most superior form of jihad (spiritual struggle) is the Hajj (Pilgrimage) which finds acceptance with God."

Many people might go on Hajj, but this does not mean that all such Pilgrimages will find "acceptance with God". Conversely, there are Sufi accounts that tell how some people who were intending to go on Hajj, yet, were prevented from doing so through making sacrifices of time and/or money and/or self to help others, nonetheless, had their Pilgrimage accepted by God despite not having gone on the actual physical journey that accompanies Pilgrimage.

Any Muslim who is healthy and has the financial means comes under the obligation of performing Hajj. As the foregoing verse of the Qur'an indicates, for such people, Hajj becomes a duty that only can be discharged through performance of the Pilgrimage, and the discharge of this duty is quite a separate issue from whether, or not, any given observance of the rites of Hajj "finds acceptance with God".

In short, one can fulfill the duty of Pilgrimage without necessarily having one's Hajj found by God to be an acceptable expression of the superior form of jihad to which the Prophet alluded. On the other hand, sometimes, the quality of an individual's intention for Hajj might be sufficient to either fulfill the basic duty of Shari'ah, or to find acceptance by God as a superior form of jihad, or both.

Furthermore, the fact that Pilgrimage is only incumbent on those who, aside from being healthy, can afford to do so indicates that the observance of Hajj is not an indispensable component of Shari'ah. In other words, as desirable as the observance of a Hajj might be that finds acceptance in the Eyes of God, and as necessary as the discharging of the duty of Hajj might be for those who are financially capable, there are hundreds of millions of people who will never go, or have never been, on the physical journey of Hajj, but who, as a result, are not necessarily at any spiritual disadvantage relative to those people who are able to go on Pilgrimage.

While the performance of a duty might be meritorious and while God might reward those people who discharge their duty properly, the duty remains irrespective of whether there is any reward associated with it or not. In fact, the duty that is discharged without thought of reward or recompense is best, for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have narrated the following tradition concerning Moses (peace be upon him): "(Moses said) -- My Lord, teach me that I may perform the deed required to earn your good pleasure. (Divine response) -- You shall love whatever you love to please Me alone. You shall likewise dislike whatever you dislike only to please Me. This is the action most acceptable in My sight, the only one that will earn My good pleasure."

The Qur'an asks: "Who is the one who will lend to God a goodly loan?" (57:11) The goodly loan is one that is given in the spirit of the foregoing Hadith. The goodly loan gives expression to the following Quranic ayat: "Say: Surely, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds." (6:162)

The goodly loan is not primarily about the Pillars of Islam -- although it can be if an individual's niyat or intention concerning the observance of the basic requirements of Shari'ah is truly sincere. The goodly loan tends to be more involved with cultivating the spiritual potential of 'fitra' by following the path of Deen to its conclusion.

The Qur'an states: "To everyone, We have appointed a Law and a Way." (5:48) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "This world is prohibited to the people of the next world, and the next world is forbidden to the people of this world, and they are both forbidden to the people of Allah." The Qur'an also indicates: "And you shall be three sorts. Then (as to) the companions of the right hand; how happy are the companions of the right hand! And (as to) the companions of the left hand; how wretched are the companions of the left hand! And the foremost are the foremost, these are they who are drawn nigh (to Allah), in the gardens of bliss. A numerous company from among the first, and a few from among the latter." (56: 7-14)

The people of this world are the companions of the left. The people of the next world are the companions of the right, and the people of Allah, they are, by the Grace of God, the foremost. As noted above, the people of this world (companions of the left), the people of the next world (companions of the right), and the people of Allah (the foremost), all have a "Law and a Way".

The people of this world operate in accordance with the laws of the lower levels of nafs. Their way is the path of Dunya -- that is, to pursue the network of entanglements linking the machinations of different people through worldly interactions and aspirations.

The people of the next world emphasize the external letter of Shari'ah or Divine Law. Their way is to attain Paradise and avoid Hell by, God willing, complying with, to the best of their ability, the rules that prescribe and proscribe with respect to beliefs, values and actions.

The people of Allah focus on the ultimate form of Divine Law that is being given expression through the Purpose of Creation, and this is not a matter of attaining Heaven or avoiding Hell--but of fulfilling the capacity of 'fitra', and, thereby, being able to worship God in accordance with the spirit of the Purpose that brought Creation into being ... that is, through knowing the Hidden Treasure. Moreover, the term 'knowing' being used here encompasses many modalities, levels, nuances, and facets that transcend mere information about what the 'do's and don'ts' are and how one should observe the litanies associated with these 'do's and don'ts'.

The Way of the people of Allah is follow the Quranic counsel: "So, flee to God." (51:50) Consequently they do not flee to the world, or toward Paradise, but, rather, they flee to the Source of both worlds.

The Way of the people of Allah is the science of Deen. God willing, this Way leads, eventually, to a condition in which the individual guards Divine secrets (the adab of sobriety), but is inwardly intoxicated with an awareness of the Divine Presence, along with a concomitant knowledge that comes through this Presence, and, together, these (Presence with knowledge) inform the individual how to be in the world with: people of this world, people of the next world, and people of Allah.

To be “outwardly sober with the world” is to know -- at least, in principle, and, sometimes, in detail -- how the ‘people of this world’ and the ‘people of the next world’ fit into, the Divine Purpose, while, simultaneously, maintaining the secrets of that Divine Purpose that pertain to the People of Allah. To be “outwardly sober with the world” is to be a locus of manifestation for veiling -- by means of adab -- with respect to these latter secrets, while interacting with ‘people of this world’ and ‘people of the next world’ in accordance with the insights, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and unveiling that is given expression through the inward condition of spiritual intoxication.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “If someone treats you with nafs (the lower soul), then, treat them with ruh (spirit).” God willing, this is what those who are “outwardly sober with the world” endeavor to do -- but to whatever extent they, by the Grace of Allah, are able to do so, this is because, by means of intoxication, the spirit is able to serve as a vehicle through which Divine qualities are manifested ... for, surely, “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw.” (8:17)

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that: “Of course, the joy of intoxication might occasionally appear outwardly, but the sobriety of discernment remains a necessary concomitant of faith.” Contrary to the author’s foregoing contention, “the joy of intoxication” appears outwardly on a continuous basis, and not just “occasionally”.

There are a number of reasons why thousands of people have been seeking out the ‘people of Allah’ across the many centuries since the time when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was physically present on Earth and set in motion, by the leave of Allah, the spiritual lineages that serve as channel-ways of that on-going spiritual transmission. One of these reasons is because of the rays of barakah (grace) that shine out from the sun of intoxication that has risen in the ‘people of Allah’.

The Qur'an described the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the following manner. "There has now come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is your suffering; eagerly desirous is he for your welfare; toward the believers kind and compassionate." (9:128)

Although Sufi shaykhs are not Messengers of Allah, they are 'people of Allah' who struggle to follow the example of the Prophet. As a result, not only do they take seriously the suffering and welfare of others, but they seek, as well, to reflect, according to their capacity to do so, something of the same kind of kindness and compassion as did the Prophet.

By the Grace of God, one witnesses qualities of love, generosity, help, guidance, kindness, friendship, mercy, and compassion that radiate from the 'people of Allah'. These are all expressions of the intoxication that is present -- an intoxication that is the locus of manifestation for the Presence of Divinity.

A Sufi shaykh who is spiritually realized interacts with people through this Presence, and the joy of intoxication -- together with the concomitant insight, knowledge and wisdom that is inherent in such intoxication -- touches the minds, hearts, spirits and lives of the people who find their way to, or are found by, this Presence. As a result, these people feel comfort, happiness, peace and joy when in this Presence, and these experiences are palpable proof of the way in which the "joy of intoxication" is manifested on a continuous basis in overt, apparent ways.

Indeed, one of the dimensions of the joy of intoxication is sharing one's good spiritual fortune with others. Anyone who has watched a shaykh doing this cannot miss the great happiness that permeates the way such an individual interacts with seekers, in particular, and people, in general.

Furthermore, intoxication and discernment are but two different modalities of one, and the same, spiritual condition. Consequently, the author is incorrect when he implies discernment is a function of sobriety and that the latter must be used to hold the "joy of intoxication" in check.

In reality, spiritual discernment is an expression of the same Presence that underwrites intoxication. Sobriety is not a matter of applying discernment to intoxication but of using the discernment inherent in spiritual intoxication to modulate the manner in which intoxication is manifested.

The "joy of intoxication" has many faces. Ecstasy is only one of them.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that “The world is the domain of doing what is right and proper, and this needs to be established in terms of a clear distinction between do’s and don’ts. Observing the necessary distinctions demands sober awareness of our actual situation in the world and society.”

The author is incorrect when he claims that “the world is the domain of doing what is right and proper,” and, then, goes on to indicate that what is “right and proper” is a function of, or synonymous with, “do’s and don’ts”. Actually, this world is the domain of struggle, and distinguishing “between do’s and don’ts” is only one aspect of this struggle.

Consider the following verses of the Qur’an. “Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community. But this has not been done so that He might try you through that which He has given you.” (5:48) “Surely, We have placed all that is on earth as an ornament thereof, that We may try them -- which of them is best in conduct.” (18:7) “And We test you through evil and through good by way of trial.” (21:35)

What is the nature of the trial to which the foregoing verses refer? What does being “best in conduct” entail?

Is the trial merely a matter of whether, or not, one complies with the “do’s and don’ts” entailed by the surface form of Shari ‘ah? If this is so, then, why do the “do’s and don’ts” comprise only about 1/12th of the Qur’an (a little over 500 verses from a total of some 6000)? What are the other 11/12ths of the Qur’an about?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has indicated there are seven levels of meaning inherent in the Qur’an -- starting with the surface text and, then, proceeding to deeper and deeper levels of significance. Even if one were to suppose that the six deeper levels of meaning associated with verses that, on the surface, were about “do’s and don’ts” were nothing but additional refinements of these “do’s and don’ts” -- and this is, by no means, a foregone conclusion -- nevertheless, one is faced with the fact that the other 11/12ths of the Qur’an that are not concerned with specifying, or elaborating upon, various “do’s and don’ts” also entail six further levels of meaning beyond that of the surface level.

Can one automatically assume that the far greater portions of the Qur’an -- both on the surface as well as on the deeper levels -- which do not address issues of “do’s and don’ts” merely have a supporting role with respect to the

sections of the Qur'an that are about "do's and don'ts"? Or, is it possible, that the proper emphasis really should be the other way around, and that, consequently, observance of the "do's and don'ts" plays a very important, but auxiliary role, to the essential 'trial' of life?

If the basic 'trial' of life is a matter of whether, or not, we comply with the "do's and don'ts" of the outer forms of Shari'ah, then, why did the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) say: "This world is maintained in existence by illusion"? Furthermore, why did the Prophet say: "People are asleep, and when they die, they awake," as well as: "Die before you die"? Finally, why did the Prophet pray to God: "Show me things as they really are"?

If the basic 'trial' of life is about complying with "do's and don'ts", then, isn't the matter rather straight forward? What is all this business about illusion, and being asleep, and needing to wake up, and seeing things as they really are?

Perhaps, one might argue that those people who comply with the "do's and don'ts" are individuals who have seen through the illusion of the world, and have woken up, and have died to themselves, and have come to see things as they really are? Whereas those individuals who do not comply with the "do's and don'ts" are people who remain entangled in illusion, are still asleep, have not died to themselves, and do not see things as they really are.

If this is so, then, why does the Qur'an draw distinctions among the people of the right and the foremost? If the premise of the previous paragraph becomes the operative presupposition, then, what is the nature of the differences among Muslim, Mu'min, and Mohsin? If the assumption of the last paragraph is to be accepted, then, why did the Prophet distinguish between 'people of the next world' and 'people of Allah'?

Are we to suppose there are no differences between either the foremost and 'those of the right hand', or among Muslim, Mu'min, and Mohsin, or between 'people of the next world' and 'people of Allah' in relation to: illusion, being asleep, having died before they die, and seeing things as they really are? Yet, if this is not the case -- and, surely, there are very significant differences involved here--then, what, precisely, are the nature of the aforementioned distinctions being drawn by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)?

The essential trial of this world is the struggle to discover what the purpose of our created life is. Furthermore, those who are “best in conduct” are the ones who come to both realize and give expression to that purpose.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Accursed is the world and accursed is all that is in the world, except the remembrance of God and that which aids this.” Complying with the “do’s and don’ts” of the surface forms of Shari’ah is an aid to remembrance because such compliance helps to create a ‘safe’ haven -- one that is, God willing, capable of warding off evil and establishing sacred ground/space -- within which to pursue remembrance. However, complying with the “do’s and don’ts” is not a substitute for remembrance -- otherwise, the Qur’an would not have informed us that while “(ritual) worship preserves one from indecency and evil,” nonetheless, “remembrance of Allah is greatest”. (29:45)

Within the ‘fitra’, or primordial spiritual capacity, of a human being are different potentials for remembrance of, and discernment concerning, various dimensions of Divinity. These include: ‘heart’, ‘sirr’ (secret), ‘ruh’ (spirit), ‘kafi’ (the more hidden), and ‘aqfah’ (the most hidden).

With the exception of certain outer aspects of the heart, most of the aforementioned spiritual instruments are not mentioned within the context of discussions concerning the “do’s and don’ts” of Shari’ah. The absence of these instruments of spirituality from such discussions is very revealing because all of the foregoing instruments have to do with the kind of insight, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and unveiling that falls on the far side of the horizons surrounding the realm of “do’s and don’ts”-- knowledge/wisdom that would be unimportant if the whole purpose of life could be reduced down to compliance with the “do’s and don’ts” of Shari’ah.

More specifically, the ‘heart’ is a collective term that encompasses a number of facets for engaging different dimensions of Reality. Often times, exoteric discussions of the heart are limited to the aspects of heart known as ‘breast’ (“He whose breast God has expanded unto Islam enjoys a light from his Lord.” (39:22)) and ‘qalb’ (“hearts with which to understand” and “It is not their eyes which are blind, but the hearts in their breast.” (22:46))

The ‘breast’ concerns our capacity, within certain limits, to be sensitive to, or resonate with, the light of guidance. People in whom the ‘breast’ is not

active are in spiritual darkness because they are not able to detect the Presence of Divine Light in Revelation or Prophetic guidance.

The 'qalb' gives expression to our potential for coming to know and understand -- again, within certain limits -- some of the meaning inherent in the Light of guidance. Whereas the 'breast' -- when properly functioning -- acknowledges that guidance has a Light that is Divine in origin, the 'qalb' is our way of beginning to become acquainted with the nature of that Light.

However, the foregoing facets of the heart are about as far as many exoteric discussions of the heart venture. Consequently, dimensions of the heart's spiritual capacity such as the 'fo'ad' ["The fo'ad did not lie concerning what it saw." (53:13)], which involves spiritual vision, or other dimensions of the heart concerning unveiling and various conditions of spiritual knowing rarely find their way into exoteric discussions because these modalities of experiential understanding tend to run counter to the exoteric inclination to stick with surface phenomena or allow anything into the discussion that might suggest that the purpose of life involves something more than just a knowledge of, or compliance with, the "do's and don'ts" of Shari'ah.

Yet, the Qur'an stipulates: "Devote oneself to God wholeheartedly." (73:8) How can one do this with less than all of the dimensions of spiritual potential contained in the heart?

Similarly, when the Qur'an informs us that: "God knows the secret (sirr) and that which is more hidden (kafi)," (20:7) few, if any, exoteric discussions stop to consider why the Qur'an mentions these dimensions of human spiritual potential, or what these dimensions of 'fitra' are all about, or how they figure in to the Purpose of Creation. Once again, these aspects of spiritual capacity are often glossed over in such discussions because the former tend to raise questions that point beyond the realm of compliance with "do's and don'ts" as the primary reason for Creation's being brought forth by Divinity.

The Qur'an states: "They will ask thee concerning the spirit. Say: The spirit is by the command of my Lord, and of its knowledge you have been vouchsafed but little." (17:85) This does not say that greater knowledge of the 'ruh', or spirit, cannot be acquired -- only that, in general, a very limited knowledge concerning it has been given.

However, through the development of qualities such as: repentance (tauba), patience (sabr), sincerity (iklas), taqwa ["Have taqwa and God will teach you." (2:282)], gratitude (shukr), dependence (tawakkil), and love (ishk), then, if God wishes, experiential knowledge concerning the 'ruh', along with other dimensions of 'fitra', might be "vouchsafed". Moreover, like the heart, 'ruh', or spirit, is a collective term for a spectrum of spiritual potentials [sometimes described in terms of seven attributes -- luminosity, life, love, familiarity (of a primordial nature), forbearance, permanence, and knowledge] which, God willing, are capable of engaging Divinity through different modalities of experiential knowing, understanding, wisdom, and unveiling.

Knowledge of the spirit is an important source of spiritual discernment concerning the nature of the Divine Purpose for which Creation was brought forth -- namely, coming to know the Hidden Treasure. Unless God wishes otherwise, basic compliance with the "do's and don'ts" of Shari'ah will not result in this kind of spiritual discernment.

With respect to these "do's and don'ts", the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, claims that: "Observing the necessary distinctions demands sober awareness of our actual situation in the world and society." In truth, however, observing distinctions concerning "do's and don'ts" neither requires mystical, nor esoteric "awareness of our actual situation in the world", nor does compliance with these "do's and don'ts", in and of itself, necessarily give expression, or lead, to such awareness.

In fact, "awareness of our actual [my emphasis] situation in the world" only comes, God willing, through the various spiritual states, stations, and conditions that are derived from being committed to the science of Deen -- that is, the Sufi path. Compliance with the "do's and don'ts" of Shari'ah can help prepare, as well as assist, an individual who is seeking such awareness, but such compliance, by itself, is insufficient to realize the full spiritual capacity of 'fitra' and, thereby, enable it, God willing, to come to know the Hidden Treasure in a manner that is commensurate with, or reflective of, the original Divine Intention that brought forth Creation.

69 - Love

Page 37 - Chapter Three: "Intoxication is the fruit of finding God. The Sufis commonly express the quest for God in the language of love, the most intense and profound of human experiences. In employing this language, they are following not only the realities of human nature, but also explicit Koranic verses and Hadiths. Especially significant is this verse. "Say [O Muhammad]: 'If you love God, follow me, and then God will love you'" (3:31). There is hardly any verse in the Koran more important for specifying the rationale for Islamic and Sufi praxis. Why is it that Muslims strive so hard to follow the Prophet's Sunnah? The simple answer is that they love God and God has commanded them to follow Muhammad so that God may come to love them.

"In a typical Sufi reading of this verse, love for God drives the seeker to search for the mutuality of love, which is to say that the lover wants to be loved by his Beloved and to taste the wine of his Beloved's embrace. No lover is satisfied short of reciprocity. This verse tells us that the only way to show that you love God is to adopt the sobriety of Muhammad, and this means that you must follow his practices, that is, the Sunnah, which is codified in the Sharia. If you can sincerely follow Muhammad that will make you worthy of God's love and open you up to the intoxication of His presence."

Commentary: The author is incorrect when he asserts that "intoxication is the fruit of finding God.". There are several reasons for this.

First, spiritual intoxication -- on whatever level -- is a gift of God. Irrespective of how hard an individual might search for Divinity, no one receives the disclosures of one, or another, variety of intoxication unless Divinity permits this.

In other words, no one 'finds' God unless God wishes to be found. The trials, tests of conduct, and striving within this world are nothing more than the offerings of candidates applying for grants of Divine Favor, but the One Who possesses the "keys of the heavens and earth" (42:12) is Independent and dispenses Favor in accordance with Divine Himma or Aspiration in conjunction with the Purpose underlying and permeating Creation.

We might be seekers, but we are not the primary Seeker. In fact, we are the sought, and the one who understands this seeks to accommodate the interests of the Seeker, and, then, God willing, waits in a condition of repentance, as well as with qualities such as: patience, sincerity, gratitude, taqwa, trust, hope, and love.

In the Qur'an, God instructs the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to: "Say: "This is my way. I call to God upon insight -- I and whoever follows after me." (12:108) Those who, by the Grace of God, have been granted the gift of such insight, understand, at least, two fundamental principles: (1) "God is never unjust toward his servant" (3:182); (2) "To God belongs the conclusive argument." (6:149)

Consequently, if a person does not receive intoxication, no injustice has been done to that individual. On the other hand, if someone does receive intoxication, then, there is no court of appeals for those whom might object, since the Supreme Source of all "conclusive arguments" has issued the edict concerning the conferring of such intoxication.

Secondly, intoxication is not 'the' only modality through which Divinity dispenses Favor. Unveiling can assume many different forms, and intoxication is only one of them - and, as indicated previously, even in the case of intoxication, there are many kinds and levels of this condition.

All of the instruments of spiritual potential contained within 'fitra' are capable, under the appropriate circumstances of, God willing, serving as loci of manifestation for Divine disclosure. All of these possibilities provide different, but complementary, engagements of Reality, and, in fact, all of these modalities are required to be operating properly in order for the individual to be fully realized.

Spiritual intoxication is important. However, it is not the be all, and end all, of spirituality since not only does a great deal depend on the nature of the intoxication in any given case, but 'fitra' contains an array of potentials for engaging Divinity that are capable of coloring, orienting, modulating, and shaping the condition of intoxication being experienced.

In addition to the foregoing, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* isn't quite correct when he contends that love is "the most intense and profound of human experiences". He would have been closer to the truth if he were to have said words to the effect that: 'love is 'one' of "the most intense and profound of human experiences," but most human beings have never experienced love in the way that the 'People of Allah' do.'

A previously cited Hadith Qudsi states: "Whoever seeks Me, finds Me. whoever finds Me, comes to know Me. whoever comes to know Me, loves Me. whoever loves me, that person I slay, and whomever I kill, I

owe that person blood-money, and to whomever I owe blood-money, I am the recompense for that blood-money.”

Although the love of those who come to know Divinity is never left behind, the fact of the matter is, there are two conditions, in addition to love, that are alluded to in the foregoing Hadith Qudsi -- namely, being slain (i.e., fana), and recompense for the one who is slain in this fashion (i.e., baqa), and these conditions are both different from, and, yet, complementary to, the dimension of love, as well as being every bit as intense and profound as the condition of love.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*: “the Sufis commonly express the quest for God in the language of love.” In truth, and as suggested above, the language of love tells only part of the spiritual story - albeit, a theme of fundamental importance to the story of Creation’s purpose.

Furthermore, there is a reason why the dimension of love is often given emphasis in Sufi literature. Aside from its central importance, love is the last outpost of familiarity through which spiritually unrealized individuals can experience some degree of resonance with the ineffable, mystical realms that transcend the nature of everyday sorts of experience.

More specifically, there is nothing in the ‘normal’ lives of spiritually unrealized individuals that can serve as a ‘likeness’ to the conditions of ‘fana, ‘baqa’, and any number of modalities of unveiling that might take place through such spiritual instruments as the heart, sirr, ruh, kafi or aqfah. However, many people have had some sort of exposure to love -- at least in a limited way.

Therefore, rather than speak about that which is not only beyond language and concepts, but also that needs to be directly experienced in order for an individual to have any sense of even some of what is involved -- and, as a result, is beyond the comprehension of spiritually unrealized people-- Sufis use the language of love to serve as a medium of communication since there is a certain degree of overlap between the love of spiritually unrealized individuals and mystical love.

Nonetheless, irrespective of whatever degrees of commonality might exist in the understanding of spiritually unrealized and realized individuals with respect to the nature of love, the latter group tends to experience love in a very different way than do most people in the

spiritually unrealized group. Moreover, the nature of the former sort of experience will vary, God willing as an individual proceeds along the Sufi path.

For example, there is a dimension of the heart that concerns love of both particular individuals, as well as humanity, in general. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not complete your faith until you love one another." In addition, on another occasion the Prophet is reported to have said: "If you love your Creator, then, love your fellow beings first."

In addition, there is another dimension of the heart that revolves about love for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "None of you can have perfect faith till I become dearer to you than your father, children, and all humankind."

There is a further dimension of the heart that gives expression to a love that is focused exclusively on Divinity. Thus, the Qur'an indicates: "Say: 'Surely, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds."

An important aspect of this Divine love is that it is not a means to an end. In other words, one does not love Divinity because God is the One Who, for example, can grant Paradise or other Divine Favors. Rather, one loves Divinity because one has been created with not only a capacity to give all that one has and do all that one does for no other purpose than as a result of an intense love for Divinity, but one also seeks to love Divinity because, by the Grace of Allah, one has acquired a *niyat* (intention) and *himma* (aspiration) that seeks to give expression to the aforementioned capacity for Divine love.

Beyond the love of the heart, there also is a dimension of love within the potential of the *ruh* or spirit. The Qur'an says of those who love through this facet of the *ruh*: "He loves them, and they love Him." (5:54) With respect to such love, Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) says: "He who has tasted of the pure love of God will have no desire for the world and will avoid one and all."

In a Hadith Qudsi, Allah says, via the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "My servant does not cease to draw nigh unto Me through free-will offerings, until I love him." In another Hadith Qudsi, cited earlier, love of

Divinity arises out of coming to know Divinity, and since God is the One Who has brought one to a condition of such knowledge, God is the One Who has induced love in the individual through such knowledge of Divinity--and the giving of such knowledge is an expression of God's love for the individual.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that, with respect to the issue of love: "Especially significant is this verse. "Say [O Muhammad]: 'If you love God, follow me, and then God will love you'" (3:31). There is hardly any verse in the Koran more important for specifying the rationale for Islamic and Sufi praxis. Why is it that Muslims strive so hard to follow the Prophet's Sunnah? The simple answer is that they love God and God has commanded them to follow Muhammad so that God may come to love them."

The author's answer might be "simple", but it is not necessarily correct. If we leave aside the fact that some people follow the Prophet not because they love God in any essential way but because they want to attain Paradise, or avoid Hell, and have been informed that following the Prophet is the means to the desired end, one might raise the question of why someone would follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) if the individual's goal is neither to attain Paradise, nor avoid Hell?

The Prophet is reported to have said: "Love God on account of the blessings that have been conferred upon you every day by Him, and love me on account of the love that God has for me." A Sufi follows the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) not because she or he has been commanded to do so, but because the Prophet is someone God loves, and we love God because God has conferred upon us His blessings -- which includes, among other things, the example of the Prophet.

Whatever love an individual has for God, it is a gift of God. It is one of the blessings that Divinity has conferred upon the individual and serves as an example of the sorts of thing to which the Prophet was alluding when he counseled people to love God for the blessings that Divinity conferred upon them every day.

Being inclined to follow the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) for no other reason than that God loves him, gives expression to another blessing that has been conferred on an individual. The Qur'an is instructing Muhammad (peace be upon him) to tell people that by following the Prophet out of love for God, the blessing of God's love will be conferred upon them.

As the Qur'an promises: "If you are thankful, truly I shall increase you." (14:7) Following the Sunnah (model of conduct) of the Prophet, is an expression of love for God, as well as an expression of gratitude for the blessings that God confers on one, and the love that God gives to those who follow the Prophet marks an "increase" for those who are fortunate enough to receive this blessing.

One starts the foregoing process with the love that God has engendered in the individual through the daily provision of blessings. One ends that process (i.e., following the Sunnah of the Prophet) with the blessing of love that God confers on the one who follows the Prophet, and in between the beginning and the end of the process, the individual's spiritual condition, God willing, has been expanded or increased.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is quite incorrect when he states that: "In a typical Sufi reading of this verse [i.e., "Say [O Muhammad]: 'If you love God, follow me, and then God will love you'" (3:31)], love for God drives the seeker to search for the mutuality of love, which is to say that the lover wants to be loved by his Beloved and to taste the wine of his Beloved's embrace. No lover is satisfied short of reciprocity." Contrary to the contention of the author, any individual who is dissatisfied with anything "short of reciprocity" is no lover of God.

Love of Divinity is its own end, and, therefore, love is not a means to something else -- such as reciprocity. Love is unconditional, and whoever seeks to place conditions on the giving of love is being motivated by something other than love of Divinity.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "There is no peace for a believer other than in meeting one's Lord." So, while the one who sincerely loves God might be restless with the pain of separation and longing for the embrace of the Beloved, one of the characteristics of the sincerity of the individual's love for Divinity is that there is no expectation of reciprocity.

This is the sweet pain of a love that is given without conditions. One longs; one is restless; one hopes; ... but what can one do when one is in love ... except to go on loving within the ruins of one's heart.

God, through a Hadith Qudsi, indicates: "I (Allah) am found in the hearts that are broken for my sake." And, surely, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace

be upon him) is reported to have said: "Everything lives and develops in accordance with that for which it has been created" ... even broken hearts.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "If you can sincerely follow Muhammad that will make you worthy of God's love and open you up to the intoxication of His presence." Yet, the Qur'an reminds us: "If Allah were to take humankind to task for their wrong-doing, God would not leave a living creature, but God reprieves them to an appointed term." (16:61)

What makes an individual worthy of God's love is, among other things, Divine generosity, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. As a Sufi master once said: "What comes to us from Divinity is much more important than what goes from us to Divinity," and the former, through one modality or another, always precedes the latter.

An individual has the inclination to follow the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) due to the Presence of God's Grace. An individual gives sincere expression to such following only because of the Presence of God's Grace.

Consequently, 'worthiness' is, likewise, a Divine gift. God gives us intention, *himma* (aspiration), sincerity and love with respect to following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the presence of all these Divine gifts constitutes the basis of any claim on 'worthiness' that we might have.

Finally, the author claims that: "the only way to show that you love God is to adopt the sobriety of Muhammad, and this means that you must follow his practices, that is, the Sunnah, which is codified in the Sharia." This contention is both incorrect and misleading.

One cannot "show" God that one loves Him. In truth, one either loves God or one does not. No amount of following the Prophet can substitute for an underlying absence of love for Divinity or the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

There are many different things that could motivate someone to comply with the Sunnah of the Prophet. A desire for name, fame, influence, community standing, power, self-glorification, career, marriage, and Paradise could all serve -- individually or collectively-- to ensure an individual's external compliance with the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Love for God and His Messenger is not in the act but, rather, is in the intention and aspiration that underlie and permeate the engagement

of an act. Whether the following of the Sunnah of the Prophet does, or does not, give expression to love depends on the spiritual condition of an individual.

Furthermore, the “must” of love is quite different from the “must” of command or propriety. One who is in love does not follow the Prophet because of Shari’ah -- instead, one who is in love follows Shari’ah because of the Prophet.

In any event, the author is somewhat misleading when he asserts that the Sunnah “is codified in the Sharia.” If, by the term “Sharia”, he is referring to the collection of “do’s and don’ts” that make up the exoteric framework upon which Muslim jurists and theologians draw to determine the legal status of acts within a given Muslim community, then, only part of the Sunnah of the Prophet is codified within the Shari’ah, and these would have to do with questions surrounding: prayers, fasting, zakat, Hajj, marriage, divorce, adoption, death, inheritance, stealing, adultery, and the like.

There are many other facets of the Sunnah that are not codified within the foregoing sense of Shari’ah. For instance, Prophetic actions involving, among other things, generosity, compassion, love, forgiveness, tolerance, kindness, thoughtfulness, friendship, remembrance, courage, trust, taqwa, sincerity, repentance, gratitude, and many facets of adab are not codified in the exoteric version of Shari’ah, although all of these are part of the esoteric approach to Shari’ah.

In other words, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in which this latter, esoteric sense of Shari’ah is rooted, is of fundamental importance to the struggle toward realization of the Divine Purpose for which Creation was brought forth. On the other hand, although the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) upon which the exoteric form of Shari’ah is based also are of importance, nonetheless, in the terminology of an earlier discussion on this matter, the exoteric form of Shari’ah is, to a great extent, a means of creating the sort of space- - individually or collectively -- within which the more essential sense of Shari’ah (that is, the esoteric dimension) might be pursued if an individual is inclined to do so through acts of free-will offering.

One cannot “adopt the sobriety of Muhammad” until one has imbibed the love in which that sobriety is rooted. Furthermore, the meaning and significance of that sobriety can only be found through following those

aspects of the Prophet's Sunnah that are not codified in the exoteric framework of Shari'ah.

Earlier a quote from Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) was given in which he indicated that anyone who has tasted the pure love of God loses all desire for the world and tends to avoid one and all. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is someone who not only had tasted the pure love of God but, as well, had drowned in that love.

Yet, although he had no desire for the world, he did not "avoid one and all" -- in fact, quite the opposite. Why?

Sobriety, contrary to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, is not a function of any need of rational discernment to distinguish relevant issues concerning "do's and don'ts" of Shari'ah. The spiritual insight that comes through the condition of intoxication gives rise, God willing, to whatever discernment is required with respect to Shari'ah.

In truth, sobriety is a sacrifice of those who love, and are loved by, God. They intentionally 'tone down' the experience of intoxication in order to be able teach the spiritually unrealized.

On the one hand, through the adab of sobriety, the secrets of the condition of intoxication are veiled from public awareness. On the other hand, by assuming the veil of sobriety, 'People of Allah' are able to use that veil in a manner that permits them to draw upon the knowledge of spiritual intoxication and communicate/interact with people who are thirsting after the same Fountain of intoxication.

If the 'People of Allah' did not maintain the sobriety of adab, those who are spiritually unrealized would not be able to learn about either the exoteric or esoteric realms from the former individuals. Sobriety is an expression of Divine Mercy that permits people to have access to the Truth in a form, and on a level, with which they can work.

In the absence of sobriety, people would be left with only the unfathomable depths of the spiritually intoxicated. Sobriety is the common isthmus that links the sea of realized spirituality with the sea of unrealized spirituality, and across this isthmus, important truths are carried by the 'People of Allah' who, through the adab of sobriety, deliver their provisions to the spiritually hungry in a form that can be of practical value to the latter.



70 - Worship

Pages 38 and 39 - Chapter Three:“ ‘Sufism,’ Bushanji said, ‘used to be a reality without a name.’ When people start naming things, the reality that tends to get lost is the presence of God. Naming brings about a certain distance, differentiation, and sobriety. The Koran tells us that after God created Adam, ‘He taught him the names, all of them.’ (2:31) Naming is part of human nature, because God taught people language at the time of their creation. But naming pertains to separation and multiplicity, to the rational discernment that allows us to experience ourselves as different from others. In contrast, the uncreated and undifferentiated realm represents a kind of drunkenness. When lovers find their Beloved present, they lose sight of multiplicity, separation and otherness, and they cannot tell the difference between themselves and God.

“The ‘names’ that God taught to Adam are bodies that God Himself bestowed on the realities prefigured in His own eternal knowledge. Like all bodies, they pass and perish, but also like all bodies, they have fixed archetypes in the Divine. And just as names are bodies, so also bodies are names for the divine spirit that God breathed into each of His images. Each body provides the spirit with a different name, which is to say that we differentiate reality through our very selves, because we are diverse images of the one God. In the same way, we differentiate things by naming them because we are Adam’s children.

“In the Sufi view, the difficulty of our situation arises from the fact that we have forgotten that God taught us the names at the beginning, and that, in order to know the significance of the names, in order to perceive the realities behind the names, we have to know the names as God taught them. This is achieved by loving God rather than by loving the names and what they designate. Loving God is put into practice by following Muhammad. Then God will love us and revivify the names, and then we will see things as they truly are. We will see every name as the designation for a different ray of God’s effulgent light.

“If Sufism began as a ‘reality’ without a name, it was because those Muslims who loved God at the beginning of Islam simply loved God and followed the Prophet, and they in turn were loved by God. They had no need to name what they were doing.”

Commentary: To paraphrase Churchill, in a somewhat altered manner, ‘never have so few [words] done so much to (rather than ‘for’) so many’ -- at

least, as far as confusion is concerned. Like the rest of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, the foregoing, extended quote is rife with problems, errors, and misleading statements.

For example, according to the author “The Koran tells us that after God created Adam, ‘He taught him the names, all of them.’ (2:31) Naming is part of human nature, because God taught people language at the time of their creation. But naming pertains to separation and multiplicity, to the rational discernment that allows us to experience ourselves as different from others.” The author is making an assumption that when God taught Adam (peace be upon him) the names, God was engaged in a purely linguistic and/or rational exercise, but this is an assumption for which the author has provided no evidence to warrant doing so.

Furthermore, the implication of the author’s aforementioned position is that God introduced separation and multiplicity into the universe when He enjoined Adam (peace be upon him) in the naming game. In the process, God induced human beings to lose sight of the reality of God’s presence since, according to the author, “When people start naming things, the reality that tends to get lost is the presence of God”.

Presumably, the angels were not taught the names, for when God “showed them to the angels, saying: ‘inform me of the names of these, if you are truthful. The angels said: ‘Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou has taught us.’ (2:31 -32). At the same time, even though the angels did not know the names, nonetheless, they still were able to distinguish that which they were being shown from themselves, and, therefore, the author is wrong when he claims that “naming pertains ... to the rational discernment that allows us to experience ourselves as different from others.”

If one is to believe the author’s version of things, when Adam (peace be upon him) was taught the names by God, then, Adam (peace be upon him) was inclined to lose sight of the reality of the Presence of God since, according to the author, this is what happens “when people start naming things.” Yet, the author provides no account of why one should suppose that losing sight of the reality of God’s Presence tends to follow from the naming of things -- even if one were to assume, for the sake of argument, that the sort of naming process in which God engaged Adam (peace be upon him) necessarily involved separation and multiplicity as the author claims is the case.

The 'abd, or servant, of Allah realizes the differences between Creator and the created. Nonetheless, the true servant of God -- for example, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) or Adam (peace be upon him) -- never loses sight of the reality of the Presence of God, so, there are a variety of questions that arise concerning the tenability of the author's claims with respect to the alleged relationship between 'naming' and 'losing sight of the reality of God's Presence'.

When Adam (peace be upon him) was taught all of the names, and, then, subsequently, was requested by God to "inform them of their names" (2:33), must one suppose that Adam (peace be upon him) lost sight of the reality of the One Who was making the request? Must one assume that when Adam (peace be upon him) informed "them of their names" that this informing process was merely a vocabulary test?

If the whole exercise was merely a vocabulary test, then, why did God say to the angels, after Adam had completed his assignment, "Did I not tell you that I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? (2:33) What's the big 'secret' in a vocabulary test?

In addition, the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* is incorrect when he asserts that "naming pertains to separation and multiplicity". The Qur'an invites people to "Call upon Allah, or call upon the All - Merciful, unto which so ever you call, it is the same. His are the most beautiful Names." (17:110)

God is clearly indicating in the foregoing verse that irrespective of the Name being used, "it is the same". All Names give expression to One, and the Same, Reality, but they are loci of manifestation for different dimensions of the Hidden Treasure.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Do not curse time, for time is one of the Attributes of God." On another occasion, the Prophet is reported to have said: "Do not curse the wind, for it derives from the Breath of the All -Merciful." In the Qur'an, we are informed: "Where so ever you turn, there is the face of God." (2:115)

Time, the wind, everywhere we turn, there is Divinity. So, how, exactly, is it that "naming pertains to separation and multiplicity"? Naming is not the issue. Intention, faith, understanding, awareness, and realization are the issue.

The struggle is, in a large part, won or lost before anything is uttered or called upon. The experience of separation is a disease of the soul, and this disease is what undermines the naming process.

Moreover, contrary to the contention of the author 'multiplicity' is not a function of naming -- at least, not the sort of naming that Adam (peace be upon him) was taught by God. Indeed, the 'People of Allah' speak of tawhid (unity) as encompassing experiences in which not only does multiplicity give expression to unity, but one can witness multiplicity through unity -- and these are different, experiential engagements of one and the same Reality.

Those who, by the Grace of God, attain to the spiritual condition of 'baqa' are given the gift of individuality within tawhid (unity). These individuals are intimately aware of the reality of the Presence of God, but, at the same time, also are aware of their having a unique identity within the context of that Presence -- namely, the realization of the essential potential of fitra.

Just as separation is not a function of naming, so, too, multiplicity is not a function of naming. Names are the loci of manifestation of Divine Presence, and the individual who has lost sight of this reality has lost touch with the tradition of the naming process that was taught to Adam (peace be upon him).

Names are not a linguistic or conceptual label. Names give expression to the Face of Divinity, and when the Names are invoked, one engages that Face.

There is not a Name and that which is Named. The Name is part and parcel of the Reality being Named, and this is why God says in the Qur'an: "Call upon Me, and I will answer you," (40:60) and also: "Only those who possess the kernels remember," (39:9), for the kernels are within the Reality of the Names.

"The secret of the heavens and the earth", to which Allah alluded in a previously cited Quranic verse relating to Adam (peace be upon them) informing "them of their Names", is that the heavens and the earth, and the angels are so many loci for the manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes. Humankind has been given the spiritual capacity to understand this, but the heavens and the earth and the angels were not -- which is why the angels could not provide the Names when God asked them for these, and, also, why the heavens and the earth and the mountains refused the "trust" -- 'being afraid thereof'.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, "naming pertains to ... the rational discernment that allows us to experience ourselves as

different from others.” However, the author understands ‘naming’ as a purely linguistic and conceptual process.

In truth, the real essence of a person’s spiritual identity -- that which, God willing, permits one to be aware of oneself as a unique servant within the Divine Presence -- is rooted in the Names. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “God created Adam upon His own form,” and the ‘form’ of Divinity -- that is, the manifest realm -- are the Names and Attributes that give expression to that manifest realm.

On another occasion, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “I have been given all the Names and been sent to complete the beautiful character traits.” These are the same character traits to which the Prophet alluded when he is reported to have said: “The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character,” as well as when he is reported to have said: “Allah has 300 Attributes, and the one who acquires just one of these Attributes for one’s own character will inherit Paradise.”

Fitra, or primordial spiritual capacity, has the potential for reflecting all of the Divine Names and Attributes. This is the sense in which human beings have been created ‘in’ the image of Allah - that is, not only are human beings, in essence, rooted in the Names and Attributes of Divinity, but, moreover, human beings have the capacity to reflect, within the limits of that capacity, this Divine image or form, as well.

However, potential needs realization. This is why the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has been sent, and this is why the Prophet has been given all the Names through which, God willing, to bring this process to completion with respect to those who are prepared to struggle with submitting themselves to that process -- that is, the naming process that was taught to Adam (peace be upon him).

“Put all your trust in God,” (5:23), and God is the one who has said: “Whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger, they are with those whom Allah has blessed, the Prophets, the truthful, the martyrs, and the righteous. The best of company are they. Such is the bounty of Allah. Allah suffices as One Who knows.” (4:69 -70)

To properly obey Allah and the Messenger, one must seek to realize the purpose for which Creation was brought forth. To properly obey Allah and the Messenger, one must seek to realize, through their guidance and

assistance, one's potential for reflecting those character traits that, on the Day of Judgment, will be the best thing in the Scale.

The beautiful character to which the Prophet alluded in the aforementioned Hadith is the fully realized fitra. The fully realized fitra has the capacity to reflect the Names and Attributes of Divinity, and this reflection is what gives expression to the 'beautiful character' that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has been sent to, God willing, bring to fruition.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* contends that: "the uncreated and undifferentiated realm represents a kind of drunkenness. When lovers find their Beloved present, they lose sight of multiplicity, separation and otherness, and they cannot tell the difference between themselves and God." Contrary to the contention of the author, "The uncreated and undifferentiated' do not "represent" anything, least of all "a kind of drunkenness".

The uncreated and the undifferentiated are what they are. Furthermore, since human beings are of the created and the differentiated, one wonders why the author believed it necessary to mention the uncreated and the undifferentiated.

In addition, anyone who "cannot tell the difference between themselves and God" has got some serious spiritual work ahead of them. As one Sufi has said: "In essence we are Divinity, but we are not Divinity in Essence," and, consequently, there is a difference between "essence" and "Essence".

The essence of a human being is given expression through 'fitra' that is created. The Essence of Divinity is alluded to by the term 'Dhat', and That which is being alluded to through this term is uncreated.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "One who knows himself, knows his Lord." To know oneself, fitra must be realized, and when fitra is realized, then, the Divine Names and Attributes are reflected, according to the nature of fitra's capacity, and through this process of reflection, one comes to know one's Lord.

Nevertheless, the Lord that one comes to know is not 'Dhat'. Rather, the Lord that one comes to know is whatever dimensions of the Hidden Treasure are disclosed through the Names and Attributes being reflected in the fully realized 'fitra'.

People who are in a condition of 'fana' are not individuals who "cannot tell the difference between themselves and God". Rather, these are people who are so overwhelmed by the Reality of the Divine Presence that everything else -- including their own sense of identity -- fades away from awareness.

They are like deer mesmerized by the headlights of an on-coming vehicle. Just as the deer is not thinking: 'I am the car', but, instead, is caught up in light, so, too, the person in 'fana' is not thinking: 'I can't distinguish between God and myself' -- instead, like the deer, there is just the reality of the Presence of 'Light'.

Furthermore, the person who is in the condition of 'baqa' or subsistence in God knows very well there is a difference between the servant and the Lord. However, the Mercy, Love, Kindness, Generosity, and Compassion of the Lord is such that one is permitted to experience the rich intimacy of the condition of tawhid or unity while, simultaneously, experiencing individuality.

The author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* maintains that: "The 'names' that God taught to Adam are bodies that God Himself bestowed on the realities prefigured in His own eternal knowledge. Like all bodies, they pass and perish, but also like all bodies, they have fixed archetypes in the Divine. And just as names are bodies, so also bodies are names for the divine spirit that God breathed into each of His images. Each body provides the spirit with a different name, which is to say that we differentiate reality through our very selves, because we are diverse images of the one God. In the same way, we differentiate things by naming them because we are Adam's children."

According to the foregoing perspective, "names are bodies", and "bodies are names". In addition, while both names and bodies "have fixed archetypes in the Divine", nonetheless, both names and bodies "pass and perish".

Although the author states that "the 'names' that God taught Adam are bodies that God bestowed on the realities prefigured in His own eternal knowledge" we never learn from the author what 'bodies' are except in the aforementioned circular sense in which just as "names are bodies", so, too, "bodies are names". Moreover, the author provides nothing in the way of an explanation as to why one should accept his dual definition of stipulation that "bodies are names" and "names are bodies".

In addition, the author provides no account that reconciles how, on the one hand, names and bodies pass and perish, yet, on the other hand, have “fixed archetypes in the Divine.” Nor does he provide any elaboration concerning what is meant when he contends that ‘names’ are bodies that God “bestowed on the realities prefigured in His own eternal knowledge.”

For example, one might like to know something more about how ‘that’ - - namely, bodies and names -- that passes and perishes gets “bestowed on the realities”? One also might like to know more about the nature of this bestowal process, or the “realities” on which the bodies are bestowed, or what, if anything, realities and archetypes have to do with one another.

Finally, if “bodies are names for the divine spirit that God breathed into each of His images,” what are “His images”, and why should one suppose there is more than one ‘image’? After all, if, as the author argued earlier, names introduce separation and multiplicity into things, and if “bodies are the names for the divine spirit that God breathed into each of His images, then, where did the multiplicity of images come from (i.e., “His images”) that are not -- on the basis of the author’s own account -- either bodies or names?

In addition, what evidence does the author have to offer that what he has said is true -- namely, that “bodies are names for the divine spirit that God breathed into each of His images”? Is this a matter of the author’s theory of metaphysics, or is he saying that this is what Sufi masters teach, and, if the latter is the case, then, where is his evidence to warrant such a contention?

Furthermore, how does one make the transition from saying that: “each body provides the spirit with a different name”, to: “which is to say that we differentiate reality through our very selves”? In other words, how does the capacity to “differentiate” arise from the contention that “each body provides the spirit with a different name”?

Even if, for the sake of argument, one were to accept the author’s idea that “each body provides the spirit with a different name” -- and the author has provided nothing to substantiate that such an idea gives expression to authentic Sufi teachings -- nevertheless, accepting such an idea does nothing to demonstrate that this idea is tantamount to saying: “we differentiate reality through our very selves.” Nor does the author’s idea say anything about the nature of the differentiation process -- after all, one has to have the capacity to differentiate experience before one can apply linguistic labels to the various facets of phenomenology that are being

differentially experienced and recognized, and, consequently, having names for various manifestations of Divinity is one thing, but understanding the relationship between a name and that to which the name refers is quite another.

Is this differentiation process a purely sensory/rationalistic process, or is there something of the mystical in it? If the former is the case, then, what need is there for mysticism, and if the latter is the case, then, surely, the process of naming means something far deeper than the author is suggesting with his purely linguistic/conceptual account of things.

Is the purpose of the mystical path to “differentiate reality through our very selves”? If so, which ‘self’ is the author talking about -- the false self or the essential Self? If the ‘essential Self’ is the focus of this exercise, then, how do the internal instruments of heart, sirr, ruh, kafi, and aqfah figure into the ‘naming process’, and are these various spiritual instruments merely for the purpose of differentiation, or are other kinds of experiential modality involved that encompass ways of understanding and knowing other than differentiation?

The purpose of the Sufi path is not to “differentiate reality through our very selves”. The purpose of the Sufi path is to know, God willing, those facets of the Hidden Treasure that are disclosed to, and accessible through, a realized fitra, or spiritual capacity.

We do not need the naming process that was taught to Adam (peace be upon him) -- and which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has been sent to teach to those who are receptive -- to be able to label things or assign a one-to-one correspondence among ‘names’, bodies, and breaths of the Divine spirit, and, thereby, be in a position to give the correct name when the appropriate body is presented. Instead, we need to inculcate the naming process in order to learn about the nature of the essential Self -- for, it is through the essential Self’s capacity to reflect the Names and Attributes of Divinity, that the individual comes to know the Hidden Treasure, and, by means of this knowledge, to worship Divinity, freely, fully, and as God intended when Creation was first brought forth.

Experiential tawhid, or unity, not rationalistic differentiation and discernment, is at the heart of the mystical path. The Names and Attributes are not bodies but are, rather, loci of manifestation for the One Reality -- disclosures of the Uncreated and Unlimited to the created and limited.

Bodies and Names do not pass away. The former do not pass away because they never existed in the first place, and the latter do not pass away, because they either are in a condition of manifestation, or they are not, but, in either case, their Reality continues on through the Presence of Divinity.

Bodies and names are not bestowed on 'realities', but the 'Reality without a Name' -- that is, Dhat or Essence -- via the Names and the Attributes, gives expression to modalities of manifestation that are tied to the fixed forms of the Creative Imagination, like a shadow is tied to an object upon which the sun shines. These fixed forms do not ever come into the realm of existence, but are potentials of Divine knowledge that rely on the lights, colors and qualities of different Names and Attributes to shine through fixed forms of Divine knowledge in various ways and be manifested in accordance with the manner in which the nature of the Divine knowledge inherent in a fixed form potential gives expression to the Divine Purpose, Intent, and Aspiration underlying the bringing forth of Creation.

To the extent an individual experientially participates in the Names and Attributes -- by the process of spiritual 'reflection' that occurs through a realized 'fitra' -- then, one is capable of being aware of, and bearing witness to, the Reality of the Divine Presence. To the extent the various dimensions of an individual's spiritual potential -- such as mind, heart, sirr, ruh, kafi, and aqfah -- are purified, calibrated, and functioning harmoniously within themselves, as well as in relation to one another, then, the individual is able, God willing, to experience those states, stations, unveiling, insights, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, love, and intoxications that -- as expressions of the Hidden Treasure's disclosures of the Face of Essence to the individual's essence -- are commensurate with an individual's capacity and spiritual condition.

Contrary to the contention of the author, there is not a multiplicity of 'images' into which the Divine Spirit is blown. There is only one image, and this is the 'Muhammadan Reality'.

The sum total of fixed forms in the context of the Divine Purpose gives expression to the 'Muhammadan Reality'. The 'fitra' of each person constitute an individual facet or dimension of this 'Muhammadan Reality', and the 'fitra' of the latter has been modeled on the Divine form -- namely, the Names and Attributes.

The nature of this modeling is such that the 'fitra' of the 'Muhammadan Reality' has the capacity to 'reflect' the Divine form -- that is, the Names and Attributes. Any individual who, by the Grace of Allah, is brought to a condition of full spiritual realization is able to participate in the capacity for reflection inherent in the 'fitra' of the 'Muhammadan Reality' according to the potential of an individual's 'fitra'.

The author also is confusing, on the one hand, the animating spirit that is blown into the potential of individuals, thereby, giving manifested form to the phenomenology of life, with, on the other hand, the Divine Spirit that is blown into the 'fitra' of a prepared and receptive individual and brings spiritual realization to that 'fitra'. The 'naming process' that was taught to Adam (peace be upon him) and which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent to teach is central to preparing an individual to be receptive to the breathing of the Divine Spirit into the 'fitra'. Furthermore, it is to this -- i.e., 'fitra' brought to realization through the breath of the Divine Spirit--that the angels and Iblis were commanded to fall prostrate.

Contrary to the contention of the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, we are not "diverse images of the one God." We are different spiritual potentials within the 'Muhammadan Reality' that has the capacity to reflect the image or form of Divinity -- that is, the Names and Attributes, and, thereby, know something of the Hidden Treasure that is given expression through those Names and Attributes.

Moreover, contrary to the assertion of the author, the foregoing has absolutely nothing to do with differentiating "things by naming them because we are Adam's children". The spiritual tradition that was bequeathed to us through the Prophetic tradition begins with Adam (peace be upon him) and ends with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ["He (Muhammad) is the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets." (33:40)] has far, far, far more depth, richness, and subtlety to it than merely being a matter of giving linguistic labels to different facets of experience.

According to the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* "In the Sufi view, the difficulty of our situation arises from the fact that we have forgotten that God taught us the names at the beginning, and that, in order to know the significance of the names, in order to perceive the realities behind the names, we have to know the names as God taught them. This is achieved by loving God rather than by loving the names and what they designate. Loving God is put into practice by following Muhammad. Then God will love us

and revivify the names, and then we will see things as they truly are. We will see every name as the designation for a different ray of God's effulgent light."

The author is incorrect when he speaks in terms of perceiving "the realities behind the names". The Names and Attributes are the Reality - at least, they are the only dimensions of the Reality to which, God willing, we have the potential to access through our 'fitra' or essential spiritual capacity.

The Dhat, or Divine Essence, is beyond our capacity. The Names and Attributes give expression to those dimensions of the Hidden Treasure that, according to our capacity, Divinity wishes us to know, and we cannot 'perceive' beyond this.

The author also is incorrect when he says that the way to "know the names as God taught them" is by "loving God rather than by loving the names and what they designate." First of all, the Divine Names do not "designate" but give expression to the Presence of Divinity. Secondly, one can no more love God without loving the Names, than one can love a man or woman without loving those manifested qualities that are part and parcel of what endears an individual to one's heart.

We engage Divinity by virtue of the Names and Attributes. We know Divinity through the Names and Attributes. We experience Divinity through the Names and Attributes. We are spiritually realized through the Names and Attributes.

Finally, the author is incorrect when he claims: "Loving God is put into practice by following Muhammad. Then God will love us and revivify the names, and then we will see things as they truly are. We will see every name as the designation for a different ray of God's effulgent light."

Following Muhammad (peace be upon him) is not enough. We must love him knowing that the Prophet is reported to have said not only that: "None of you can complete your faith until I become dearer to you than your parents, children, and all humankind," but, as well, that: "Poverty flows to one who loves me faster than the rapids of a waterfall", and, therefore, the way of love is fraught with struggle and sacrifice.

We are readied for the journey of learning how to love God by, first, learning how to love the Prophet. God tells us in the Qur'an: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah, you have a beautiful pattern of conduct for anyone

whose hope is in Allah and the hereafter, and who engages much in the praise of Allah," (33:2 1) and, therefore, the way to Allah is to fall in love with the beauty of the example to which our attention is being directed by Divinity.

In addition, God does not love us because we follow the Prophet. Rather, we become inclined to follow the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) because of God's love for us, and we fall in love with the Prophet due to the blessings of God's love for us. No person can follow the Prophet nor love the Prophet without God's love for that person preceding, and underwriting, such acts.

Since God loves us eternally, the Names do not become realized 'merely' because God loves us. We must return the trust of love that God is extending to us through the gift of 'fitra', and when this is done in a manner with which Divinity is pleased ... and this includes love for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- then, if God wishes, the breath of the Divine Spirit is blown into 'fitra' and the Reality being expressed through the Divine Names and Attributes becomes realized through 'fitra' being present to such Reality.

In this realized spiritual condition, one does not "see every name as the designation for a different ray of God's effulgent light." Instead, God willing, one experiences the Reality to which the different Names give expression -- not as linguistic labels or conceptual constructs, or metaphysical 'bodies, but as Loci of Divine Manifestation.

The author completes his analysis by saying: "If Sufism began as a 'reality' without a name, it was because those Muslims who loved God at the beginning of Islam simply loved God and followed the Prophet, and they in turn were loved by God. They had no need to name what they were doing." While there is truth in what the author says in the above quote, one should also point out that 'if Sufism is now a name without a reality, this is because people like the author have totally obfuscated the 'reality' of that name by 'virtue' of their almost total lack of understanding concerning the authentic nature of the Sufi tradition.



### Conclusion

#### Pages 40 - 153; Chapters Four - Ten:

The remainder of the author's book is much the same as the first 39 pages of that work. Just as each and every page of the first three chapters (plus preface) of his book is filled with problems, misleading statements, errors, and distortions in relation to both Islam and the Sufi path (a claim that, God willing, has been substantiated completely through the 70 commentaries of the previous 470 -plus pages of reflection, exploration, discussion, and analysis), the author of *Sufism: A Short Introduction* continues on, unfortunately, in the same vein throughout the rest of his book.

One could go on, but enough has been shown to indicate that one should look to sources other than *Sufism: A Short Introduction* if one wishes to learn something of value about the actual nature of the Sufi tradition. Furthermore, since the remainder of that book commits similar sorts of mistakes as the ones in evidence during the first three chapters, then after a point, one would begin to repeat oneself if one were to continue commenting on the problems contained in the remainder of his book.

On the other hand, perhaps, a vote of thanks should be extended to the author of the aforementioned work. More specifically, if his work had not been so problematic and error-riddled, then, there might have been little motivation for someone, by the Grace of God, to take the time and make the effort to offer a much needed corrective to the author's book, and, in the process, provide, God willing, a much better introduction to the Sufi path ... although this one is not so short.

Let these commentaries end in the following manner. The Qur'an indicates: "We have shown humankind the way, whether they be grateful or disbelieving." (76:3) The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Every person who rises in the morning either does that which will be the means of one's redemption or one's spiritual ruin."

For those who are grateful and strive toward spiritual redemption, "Surely, after difficulty comes ease. Indeed, after difficulty comes ease." (94:5-6) "But, if you turn away, God will exchange you for some other folk, and they will not be the likes of you." (47:38)

Finally, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "Islam began as something strange, and it will revert to being

strange as it was in the beginning, so good tidings for the strangers.” Someone asked: “Who are the strangers?” The Prophet said: “The ones who break away from their people for the sake of Islam.” In many respects, this book has been written, by the Grace of God, for such ‘strangers’ --whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim -- since, in truth, the Sufi path is, and has been, the ‘Way’ of the strangers to whom the Prophet alluded, at least in part, through the foregoing Hadith.