



# BEGINNING'S END

A Sufi view of Self Knowledge

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri



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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

**Beginning's End** is a contemporary outlook on the Sufi sciences of self-knowledge, intended for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The author holds that truth has no end and is eternal, and that is why human beings will seek total freedom, of which material freedom is only a small part. The final freedom is a natural, spontaneous submission and being connected to timelessness, yet experiencing time.

“This book was written mainly to highlight the truth that if you wish to nourish the heart and nurture the light within, you need to make structural adjustments to your way of life as well as the all-consuming material drive. The book is a challenge to our modern lifestyle that is out of balance.

Now it is being reprinted as the gap widens between the sustainable inner happiness and the ever-increasing outer frenzy.”

– *from the* Preface to the Reprinted Edition

## **ABOUT SHAYKH FADHLALLA HAERI**

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years. A prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment, he is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **PREFACE TO THE REPRINTED EDITION**

Originally this book was written when I was living in the United States and had met many people with a strong spiritual thirst but who were completely engulfed in the competitive world of ambition and material excellence. I had realized that many of these people preferred an esoteric and less demanding path than that which I had been committed to.

This book was written mainly to highlight the truth that if you wish to nourish the heart and nurture the light within, you need to make structural adjustments to your way of life as well as the all-consuming material drive. This book is a challenge to our modern lifestyle that is out of balance.

Now it is being reprinted as the gap widens between the sustainable inner happiness and ever-increasing outer frenzy.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri  
May 2001, White River  
South Africa

## INTRODUCTION

All of us are students of self-knowledge in varying degrees of commitment and intensity. Some of us are concerned with knowledge of physical and biological matters; others with subtler, inner realms of meaning. But whatever form our search takes, we are all seeking the ultimate knowledge that has brought about our individual destinies. Our present moment, our present situation, constitutes our momentary destiny. This momentary destiny is the result of the interaction between the laws that govern existence and our individual wills, an interaction that results in a balance of these factors. The moment is the only reality of which we can be totally certain, subjectively and objectively.

The truth of 'now' is what human beings share, and 'now' is beyond time. It is not subject to the moment just past or the one to come. It is simply now – and the now that one experiences is the product of the past and the cause of the future. Now is both independent of and connected to past and future. This truth is the root of the dynamism of cause and effect and of the balance of duality in this existence.

Absolute, pure 'now' is that state of balance achieved when the pointer on the scale of duality is at the exact mid-point. When this occurs, each side is in total harmony and balance with its opposite. Duality is nullified and only pure, blissful 'now' exists.

We are born into this world in order to grow in experience and wisdom and to recognize the one unifying principle of Reality. We may recognize it in a limited way – for example, when we see ecological harmony – or we may know it in a more pervasive way when we experience the overwhelming presence of the Creator of all.

However we look at it, we must still ask, 'Having recognized the unifying principle of Reality, what comes next in our search for the purpose of existence?' After we have gained a measure of wisdom, wealth, harmony and security in this life, we then ask, 'Is there meaning beyond this? Is the recycling of the body to the earth from which it came the end of all experience?' The majority of us avoid this question, or try to rationalize it away, instead of confronting it totally and fearlessly.

Everything acts in accordance with its own nature. For example, steel belongs to the earth as iron oxide. Because of its strength, we use steel to construct bridges. But the moment a bridge is raised, the steel starts moving toward its destiny, back to dust; thus, it starts rusting. If we want to preserve the bridge, we have to balance the natural inclination of steel to return to its source with our human desire to keep the bridge from rusting. We cannot, however, pretend that the bridge will remain forever. Steel belongs to the earth, and it will fulfill its destiny; man belongs to his Creator, and wherever he finds himself, whatever he does, his natural disposition will lead him toward the knowledge of his Creator.

Experience is the meeting of two opposites. This meeting point is the human heart, for in it we experience love and hate, hope and fear, peace and agitation, wakefulness and sleep, security and insecurity. The heart of man contains the entire spectrum of experience; whenever we appeal to the heart, we find a common denominator in humanity. Otherwise, our interaction becomes transactional or hypocritical, based on economics, politics and other man-made disciplines. Although these disciplines have their place, they are limited because they do not lead us to the awareness that whatever appears negative in existence is really in harmony and balance with the total ecology. Because we do not know this, we see incongruity, imbalance, confusion and division in life.

The philosophy of our spiritual model is based on the existence of a merciful Reality that transcends time, encompasses Its creation from beyond time and in time, and creates out of love in order that It may be discovered. Man's purpose is to discover the one and only all-pervading Reality that encompasses his existence. When we are mindful of our purpose, we find a common denominator in everyone's aspirations, hopes, disappointments and problems. All of our experiences – positive and negative – are part of the process of self-knowledge. The root of our behavior can be explained by viewing it through the binoculars of the divine unity of the one Creator.

This work is a collection of glimpses which reveal the unifying substructure that underlies diverse experiences and actions, which is, itself, the truth. It is presented in the hope of confirming to the sincere seeker that the ultimate discovery is that all creation, attributes and actions, stem from and are sustained by the one Source Whose nature is independent of creation.

A taste of the vast ocean of the Oneness increases the thirst of the seeker. Ultimately, the boundary between the seeker and the sought, the questioner and the questioned, and the effect and the cause becomes so faint that one is immersed in the joyful intoxication of the complete beauty and absolute harmony where subject and object have merged.

## **PART I: THE PATH OF DYNAMIC SUBMISSION**

### ***Chapter 1: The Seeker***

The term ‘gnosis’, ultimate self-knowledge, indicates a state that has been attained by certain individuals throughout the ages. The gnostic considers that all prophets and all truly awakened men and women have attained self-knowledge. The great master of gnosis, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was asked: ‘What is gnosis?’ He characterized it as involving purity, abandonment and the search for the one Entity behind multiplicity. This search leads to the awareness of man’s inner poverty and basic nothingness, which leads to the further recognition of the completeness and perfection of whatever situation he may be in.

In every age, men of self-knowledge have existed who have known that the foundations of this knowledge could not be acquired intellectually. These men knew that self-knowledge is accessible only to those who are prepared to undergo a profound existential transformation in order to acquire mastery over themselves. The names differ – the *sanyasi* in India, the gnostic in the West, the monks of the Far East – but the path is one. In the spiritual traditions of the Near East, from the earliest dawn of civilization, we see the same quest for self-knowledge. It is known in Arabic as *tasawwuf*, or Sufism, and the follower of this Way is called a Sufi. The origin of this word is *safa*, which means purity.

As one embarks upon the path, one becomes aware that one’s present mental and physical condition arises from a variety of factors, ranging from the genetic to the environmental. Some of these factors are inherited; some are acquired; most of them can be changed. Some of the subtler influences on us, such as changes in the radiation in the atmosphere, are barely detectable. However, our recognition of any outward factor, whether subtle or obvious, depends on its existence within us. For example, if we have no love within our hearts, we cannot recognize love outside ourselves. It is the same with anger, violence or insecurity. We are conscious of all these factors through a higher consciousness in each of us which unites us.

If this higher pure consciousness is taken to its conclusion, its foundation is the basis of the Unity of mankind. The state, therefore, that each of us is in, each in his or her own internal

cosmology, is a result of the influences and factors we have mentioned. They intermingle and superimpose on each other to create what we call 'I'. From a scientific or causal point of view, our overall state is, therefore, perfect, since it results from a combination of actions and reactions and the superimposition of various layers of systems.

### *Separation and Unity*

From the gnostic standpoint, there is no separation. The concept of separation exists only for the sake of illustration and outward experience. It unfolds a situation that is completely unified. My inner state is completely unified, but if I were to describe my overall condition, I might say that my back is aching from too much travel and my stomach is upset by the altitude. These conditions result from and are revelations of the natural laws of the universe.

We deserve everything that happens to us for we get what we deserve, not what we desire. What we deserve is decreed; not superstitiously by some supernatural power, but by the manifestation of Reality through a combination of factors, both obvious and subtle, resulting in the final state. Every system is governed by a set of laws. In the case of a falling stone, for example, the gravitational force is predominant. Other factors may also influence it minutely, but every system has a limitation that governs its bounds.

As we have said, our present state results from many factors. All of these factors superimposed, collected, are connected together resulting in one overall state. Yet, for the majority of us, our inward condition is at best confused. We react to our inner confusion by blaming our state on some external factor, such as the weather or the government. The more intellectual among us may write up long, complex dissertations about the cause of our current situation. The seeker's objective is to reach a state of awareness so that he or she sees the perfection of the state he or she is in.

*The Desire to Know*

According to the gnostic teachings, Reality, or Allah, wanted to be known; therefore He created. Thus the purpose of creation is to come to know. If we set out on the path of self-knowledge, then we can only experience growth and increase.

One of the names of God in Arabic is *Rabb*, meaning Lord. This word is related to the verb *rabba*, which means to bring up to its full potential. One of the responsibilities of the Lord, therefore, is to bring people to their full potential.

If our objective is to know, we have to begin with an understanding of ourselves and our immediate situation. If I examine clearly, for example, the reasons why I lost my job – a difficult boss, unstable market conditions, a move to new premises – the loss will be quite understandable. If we simply act as pure observers and remove from our hearts any subjective psychologizing, we are bound to see perfection in every situation – however personally detrimental or unpleasant it may be. If we consider any situation purely from the viewpoint of the creational laws that govern it, we will see the perfect harmony behind it. This does not mean that we should condone destructive behavior, but rather that we should observe the absolute perfection inherent in any situation, agreeable or disagreeable. Once we have reached this state of awareness, we have made a start on the path of self-knowledge.

When we see greed, or any other emotion, arising within us – for example, in the course of a business transaction – our very witnessing of our state means it is less likely to afflict us. If we are spontaneously conscious of the anger rising in us, it is less likely that the anger will overwhelm us. Once we are able to recognize these emotions as they occur, we are less likely to be controlled by them.

*Recognition of Bounds*

The next stage in self-knowledge is the recognition of bounds. Every system exists within certain set boundaries. The simpler the system, the easier it is for us to observe the boundaries clearly. In the plant kingdom, for example, a severe frost may cause the end of a species or bring about

some mutation. The human condition is more complex because we are able to stretch the bounds that apply to us. Our physical bounds are wider than those of other forms of creation, while our inner bounds are wider still. We may, for instance, allow anger and hatred to fester within us for years before they erupt. If we do not recognize the bounds of systems, we will create disturbance in an ecology that inherently contains its programs of checks and balances. The lack of restrictions in society today has resulted in a confusion that is a reflection of our reality. The prevalent *laissez-faire* attitude means that we no longer know where a thing begins and where it ends.

Nature itself extends courtesies towards everything within it. These courtesies are bounds and they will be maintained because the laws of creation are eternal. The cosmos began from a point of non-awareness in non-time. You and I also began from a point of non-awareness. We were not aware of our existence in the womb, but awareness grew within us.

There are certain laws of the universe, such as the law of gravity, that will never change. Another is the law of action and reaction. If we give love and fairness to others, we will eventually receive it in return. It may not happen immediately, for we are tested by ourselves in order to know the extent of the purity of our intentions. We are programmed to learn the truth. The more sensitive and connected we are, the more quickly the truth will unveil itself, and insight and cognizance will prevail.

Recognizing that the laws of creation are absolute is part of our growth. We have freedom of choice, for there is no such thing as an experientially fixed state. This would be tyrannical, and creation emanated from love. It emanated from One and is permeated by Oneness. However, the laws of creation do not change simply because we are well-meaning. The law of gravity did not prevent the arrows from striking the Prophet Muhammad in the battle of Uhud. The afflictions of the Prophet Jesus did not cease because he kept on singing the one and only song of Reality, irrespective of what happened to him, as had every other prophet or reflector of truth.

Each of us has the potential to reflect the entire creation. Our nature is to want to share; that is why we cluster in cities, nations and cultures. We basically gravitate towards those who reinforce our own experience and knowledge, and erect barriers against those who do not. Different

cultures, nations and movements are all attempts to unite because most of us do not realize that everything is already united. We do not see unity because we experience everything in duality – we see life and think of death. We know poverty and wealth, hunger and satiety, love and hate. We all know these opposites, and we all want to see how everything interconnects. In other words, we are all seekers.

Everyone is a seeker of Truth but few know it. Everyone is in submission – the true meaning of *Islam* – for we are in submission to the ultimate experience of death. The only certainty we all have is that daily we are moving closer towards death. None of us wants to die and most of us are afraid of death. This, too, is a reflection of the Eternal Truth, for the Absolute, Higher Consciousness, Allah, is for ever. We have the seed of that truth in us; therefore we want foreverness. Our very desire for that foreverness arises from our perverted love of God.

It is not possible to move along the path of knowledge if we do not begin to recognize the bounds and treat them with courtesy and respect. People are now beginning to realize that the serious state the world is in today arises from our neglect of these eternally fixed bounds. The very fact that more than half the world today is in poverty whilst the minority suffers from overabundance reflects our abuse of boundaries. We claim to be scientific, yet we have arrogantly forgotten those scientific laws that govern the subtler elements of being human beings. If members of a family cannot live in harmony, how can they influence their neighbors to live in harmony? It is not possible. The sage knows that the vessel will ooze with what is in it. Show me the way a man lives and what he eats and I will tell you who he is.

Many of us attribute the desperate situation of the world to colonialism, capitalism, Zionism, communism or some other 'ism'. This situation results, however, from nothing other than failure to respect the bounds of reality.

The last few decades in the West have seen the erosion of the moral fiber that was behind the great experiment of establishing these countries. People no longer cultivate their inner awareness of these bounds and their meanings. Once we become conscious of our transgression, we see that every action has a reaction. Whenever we transgress, we eventually pay a price; there is no escape from this natural law.

*Freedom and Bounds*

In reality there is no freedom. If we could be aware of all that is happening around us, each action we take would be specific and appropriate to a particular moment in time. We do not have the capacity physically or morally to absorb the entire spectrum of Reality; however, the seeker of self-knowledge seeks to gain that capacity.

That is why the man of knowledge is in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. His knowledge comes from the recognition that there is one guiding principle that permeates everything and that everything is contained within its web. This web is tangible and we can know it if we want to. Its root is the unseen and its branches are the visible, physical manifestations.

So the reason why we are in such chaos today is very simple. We have allowed everything to happen in the name of freedom and 'open-mindedness' without placing restrictions on our behavior. Everything has its bounds, but we think we are gods, not recognizing, as the Master Ali said, that we contain the meaning of Godness within us. God will not interfere haphazardly; He will not change the law of gravity, for example. Yet we in our arrogance may forget this and try to defy the immutable laws. We may be destroyed for we are subject to these laws and not above them.

The love of Reality for us is such that we are given the freedom to transgress the bounds so as to recognize the limits and respect them. Yet, it is because of these transgressions that we find our lives in such disarray. We end up being isolated, selfish, and more dependent on our bank accounts than on the relationships we have with our friends, neighbors and countrymen. The lives of our forefathers were grounded in relationship, and they lived far fuller and happier lives.

Look at us now – the average working man may struggle for the whole year so that he can take a two-week fishing holiday – yet he could spend all year fishing. It does not cost anything. We fluctuate from one madness to another in our confusion, from heated anger to emotional, romantic love, and we call ourselves a scientific society.

Modern technology has given birth to amazing new complexities, some of which we are renouncing as we discover that technology feeds on itself. If we do not begin to see what is happening in each one of us, we will continue to apply artificial values to situations, not recognizing that the entire world and whatever is happening in it is knowable, because it is within us. If the entire cosmos is not contained within us in a meaningful sense, how else could we conceive of it?

We can point to only one thing at a time. If we are angry, we cannot be calm at the same time. If we are anxious about ourselves, we cannot show compassion at that same moment. Because of our current state of disunity, we are far more superstitious. We blame mishaps on luck and constantly seek the supernatural, not recognizing that the supernatural is only the natural which is not understood.

We are constantly falling prey to one 'ism' or another, not realizing that what we want to know is contained within us. We have either been given improper guidance, or we are weak and improperly disciplined. Therefore, we do not progress in self-knowledge, which is the only knowledge that is going to give us balance and show us why there is this apparent conflict within us.

We experience one state after another. A state of expansion is always followed by a state of contraction. How can an economy continuously grow in one country in the world unless it shrinks somewhere else? If people are suffering elsewhere, we may not be fully cognizant of their plight. We cannot have the experience of life unless we have the experience of death. We cannot fully appreciate the solace of friendship unless we experience loneliness. The man who lives his life at one extreme can have his life balanced only by the opposite extreme. Thus, if we really want to know the meaning of freedom, we must know the meaning of complete constriction. This is what all spiritual paths, all true religions, have taught.

Ultimately, to reach the goal of self-realization, all men and women of knowledge have to go through a period of reflection and retreat. It does not have to be in a cave in the Himalayas or in some other remote location. It is possible for us to have, here and now, the same experience as the great masters of history.

However a quiet, remote environment is very helpful until the seeker is strong enough to retreat into his inner cave, even though he may be in the midst of the market-place. In reality, no place is more spiritual than another. It is we ourselves who create situations from which we then have to flee in order to reach some level of quietude.

*Ignoring the Bounds*

We say we are a tolerant society. But what this really means is that we have inadvertently allowed all kinds of limiting factors to emerge, both inwardly and outwardly. Nature will recycle those who have gone beyond its bounds. The disease AIDS illustrates how nature comes to its own rescue. Respect for boundaries is part of scientific law. But through our ignorance, we have transgressed this law and have rationalized our mistakes.

We all want to be free, but we do not realize that we have inflicted tyranny upon ourselves by not recognizing the wisdom of the duality of existence. From the moment you and I are conceived, we are subject to the opposites – health and illness, growth and shrinkage, life and death. This seeming confusion is reconcilable. If we want to know, we will come to know, and the more we want to know, the more we will know. But if we are insincere, our desire for knowledge becomes a game and can even lead us to such transgressions as pursuing the occult.

Another transgression common in today's society is an undue concern with the future. People generally become concerned with knowing the future because they are not content with the now. But if we peek into the future, we are likely to cause ourselves distress. If we recognize with amazement, however, the perfection of reality as we can experience it right now and as it emanates from a pure heart, we will not worry about the future, for time will cease to exist for us. Indeed, there are people who are completely and soberly drunk with the ecstasy of the moment.

We contain within us the Book of Knowledge, which was engraved in the womb of our mothers at the moment of conception. This all-encompassing inner book gives us ultimate knowledge – provided we want to look at it. If we do, we will find that the knowledge of bounds and the fear of transgression is within us. The most useable book we can read as a guide is the ultimate book, the Qur`an. The most perfect being whose footsteps we can attempt to follow is the last of the

prophets, Muhammad. But we don't come to ultimate knowledge merely by reading a book or following a guide.

We came into the world alone and we will go out of it alone; in the meantime we are totally responsible for our actions, and with that ultimate responsibility comes ultimate freedom. But our society has failed to recognize even the normal moral bounds that have been common throughout the ages in every spiritual teaching. Instead, we have transgressed according to every system's standards. We have become so hypocritical that even our discussions about gnosis, or the inner journey, have become superficial. The reason for this superficiality is that we do not know where to begin.

We have ended up living in confusion and hypocrisy because over a period of time we have locked ourselves into a tight corner from which we do not know how to escape. We live under more and more layers of self protection and end up being completely isolated, even though we may be surrounded by people. The reason for the increasing popularity of skiing and gliding and similar sports is the illusion of freedom and escape which they bring. Everyone wants that freedom, so what is it that keeps our hearts from soaring?

### *Freedom of Inner Detachment*

The word for heart in Arabic is *qalb*; the root of it is *qalaba* – to turn, to revolve unattached. This means it is not desirous or expectant, or attached to any direction; it turns freely. In our society we often equate detachment with irresponsibility. But correct behavior is based on inner detachment accompanied by outer attachment and adherence to the laws of nature. Not keeping to these laws will cause us only affliction. Even if we do not pay for our mistakes when we commit them, we will eventually reap the fruits of our actions.

We must recognize our bond with Reality; we must see that we are totally connected and that there is no separation. You and I appear to be different because of our outer physical differences, but inwardly we are the same. It is this sameness that connects the entire race of mankind. If we do not understand this we will continue to look for a quick formula to resolve our difficulties because this is the age of instant solutions.

We are now suffering from its side-effects: instant wealth, instant happiness, instant friendship. How can friendship in the true sense grow instantaneously? That could only happen if it is based on the ultimate foundation which is the love and knowledge of Truth. Then we will find everyone in harmony because there will be true inner courtesy, not merely outer courtesy.

The truth is always there, yet we have inadvertently been seeking false truth, in the name of convenience or economic progress or whatever reason motivates us. If we do not act in accordance with the laws that govern existence, we will pay a great price. We will eventually suffer from our mistakes individually and collectively. It is inevitable, for every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The more we see this fact and the more we live in the present, the more we experience timelessness and the moment touches the infinite. At this point we are exposed to the knowledge of Reality and the system that constitutes it; so we recognize wisdom in Reality's diversity, and unity in its infinite Oneness.

When people experience this sense of timelessness, beyond expression, they are commonly said to be 'awakened' or 'realized'. All of us have the potential to see everything as it is but if we do not want this knowledge, we will end up gathering worthless information instead. If we are not schooled in the outer, how can we train ourselves in the inner? We cannot start the inward journey unless we begin with the outer. The inner moves outward and the outer ends up containing the inner.

We begin by wanting the truth and end up by being aware and totally responsible. This correctness is not subject to religiosity, but rather to the divine laws that all the prophets tried to express, culminating with the completed message of the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad.

### *The Teachings of Muhammad*

It is the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad that we are trying to follow in order that we may live better, happier lives now. The teachings of Muhammad, like the teachings of all men of knowledge of Divine Unity, are not separate from their lives.

Muhammad's life was based on spontaneous, dynamic submission. He was completely interconnected with and aware of his environment, of the past and the future. He lived in a non-time zone within time. He was subject to all the biological fluctuations, to wakefulness and sleep, and all the other experiences that every other human being is subjected to. He was the same as everyone else; yet he was different from everyone else. His similarity was based on the sharing of experiences and consciousness. His differences sprang from his indescribable degree of awareness, and his living of each moment in true submission, in a perpetual and spontaneous state of adoration and absolute glorification of the Creator. His reverence for all creation, his desire not to harm life or to change it adversely, led him to enhance whatever situation he found himself in. His life was an instrument of evolution, in a spiritual sense, not in a Darwinian sense; he helped everything along its path towards its unfolding, towards the realization of its higher potential.

Dynamic submission leads to this state; submission itself brings about unity, and dynamism makes one's life rich and blissful because that is the prescribed path of nature. Outwardly Muhammad was subject to all that we experience. He had moments of comfort and satisfaction, of apparent bewilderment and of reflection. However, a man who lived the moment totally had access to that non-time state which is utter peace; so his interior life was without doubt that of complete contentment, harmony and peace.

His outer life, however, reflected the law of opposites in this world – health and illness, acceptance and non-acceptance. Muhammad encouraged those who were following the true path and he admonished those who strayed from it.

Muhammad never allowed people to exalt him. He often reminded them that he was a mortal, born of a mother, like all other human beings. He lived in this world but he was of another world. He was intensely alive, dynamic, and scintillating, yet he said, 'If you want to see a dead man walking, look at me.' He was dead to ambition, to expectations, to attachments, to fears about the provision of material necessities, to personal anger and jealousies. But he was alive to the ever-living Reality and Its actions manifested in this existence. He was a true slave in perpetual, spontaneous adoration and worship, moving where the winds of his destiny took him, for he knew that all is from God, by God's grace, and all returns to God.

Muhammad's teachings grew out of his life, and what came through him was the message of the Creator, the Qur'an – the eternal message, applicable in all circumstances, at all times. Because his life and his teachings were one and the same, his example has been followed by millions throughout the ages.

There have been thousands of prophets throughout history from different cultures, different ages – prophets of plenty, prophets of scarcity, prophets who harnessed visible and invisible powers, prophets who ploughed the land and taught only two or three among the poor, prophets who traveled, and prophets who simply sat and spent much time in invocation. All of these prophets have been part of the divine plan. What is the meaning of prophethood and messengerhood, and why is the emergence of prophets necessary?

### *The Prophetic Teachings*

A prophet is the culmination of a mutational event that manifests clearly as a link between the past and the future, the seen and the unseen, this world and other worlds, the Creator and creation. Prophets are beings who are genetically and environmentally able to transmit, in a humanly realizable manner, the purpose of creation and the path that leads to its knowledge and fulfillment. As teachers, they are masters of the self. Yet as masters of life their very lives manifest the perfection and the truth of dynamic submission. All the prophets were in submission to their Creator. They are transforming agents, the catalysts in the perfect formula.

### **Adam**

All prophets discovered their submission to the one Reality with their awakening. The first mutational situation in creation was the rise of consciousness in man. The Prophet Adam was in total harmony with creation in a non-worldly sense. His state was one of total tranquility and harmony, and primal, blissful existence. He began to question. The rise of the questioning of the ego, desire and expectation aroused man's consciousness. With that arousal came responsibility and the need for discrimination.

The next stage that Adam went through was the gaining of knowledge of what was good for him and what was not, which desires were useful and which were destructive. Desire for the

knowledge of the spiritual path leads to a healthy drive in man, but desire for worldly possessions or material or physical relationships brings disappointment. If desire for worldly things does not bring disappointment in this existence, it will bring disappointment at some other time.

Then Adam learned the art of submission. But neither the art of submission nor man's awareness of it could have been developed without the awakening of man's higher consciousness. The faculty of reasoning was dormant until the light of consciousness shone. Prior to his arousal, Adam was in a state of non-awareness in the garden of pure bliss.

Adam learned that the all-encompassing Reality enabled him to commit errors, recognize his (Adam's) dislike of their outcome, and start afresh. Through his dynamic submission, Adam obtained the keys to heaven and hell. By accepting the truth of his nature, his Adamic nature, his human nature, which can lead him astray, as well as by accepting his divine heritage, he obtained the keys to conscious choice. The result of his choices could now be used to delineate the bounds of the path, to avoid transgressing these bounds, and to adhere to the path, thereby re-entering the garden with the key.

### **Noah**

As a man of knowledge, the Prophet Noah saw that the actions of his people were so ecologically unsound that nature itself was going to revenge and redress the imbalance. Noah foresaw the disaster that was coming, so he started in the most rational way he could to avert it. He attempted to change their actions so that their correct behavior would create a new wave to neutralize the impending disaster. But after 550 years of weeping for his people – the name Noah is from the Arabic word, *naha*, to weep, to cry or mourn – of imploring them to mend their ways, all that Noah could do was to save himself, his close ones and the animals of the land. Final destiny, once it sets in, cannot be changed.

## **Abraham**

The great and glorious Prophet Abraham met his final test when there lingered the possibility of inner attachment to his son. Prophet Abraham was given this most precious object of his affection in his old age. But a subtle doubt arose within him about the totality of his submission to his Lord. The test that arose from that doubt was the vision to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. Following the voice of truth within, Abraham began the sacrificial act. Doubt rose again, this time disguised as the voice of reason. Why should Ishmael be sacrificed? What fault had the son committed?

Abraham's test was not about sacrifice or his love for his child; rather it was about transmutation and transcending form. Would he be able to detach himself from his precious and innocent son for what he knew was the all-encompassing Reality? When the moment for the sacrifice came, Abraham's decision to transcend attachment interlinked matter and energy, which were already interlinked in the subtle realm, and manifested in the appearance of the ram.

Once the decision was made and he actually embarked upon the act, the physical sacrifice was no longer relevant. Once intention and action are united, the matter is as though done. However, there is a danger that man's weakness and subtle hypocrisy may set in and stop at the level of intention. It is not enough to love only with intention; intention must be manifested in action. The inner and outer must connect.

The Prophet Abraham was totally determined to make the sacrifice and it was only when the barrier of that determination was crossed that the actual act was transferred to the ram, and not before. If we wish to emulate Abraham or any of the prophets, we must fuse our pure intentions with our actions, our worthy desires with achievements. Otherwise we will live unfulfilled and disconnected.

## **Moses**

The Prophet Moses went through a similar self-discovery. He was inspired to deliver the message of Divine Unity to the ruling tyrant of the land. The human side of him questioned and doubted his ability. He said, 'Send me with my brother; he can speak well,' for apparently Moses suffered from stuttering.

Moses did not know what to do in the face of the mighty powers of the magicians. But his Lord said, 'You have their signs and powers and they are from me. It is not you. Draw your hand out and it will dazzle them.' Bewildered and uncertain, Moses approached the enemy. Suddenly that total submission in unity took place and Moses' beingness entered into that interspace between the seen and the unseen, between the human tyranny before him and the absolute slavery to his Lord to whom he was so magnificently bound.

So the man of true submission is no longer in a state that we, lesser mortals can describe and explain. The man of unity has already placed his investments in God's vault. He has put his ultimate treasure (his life) into God's hands; he has utterly, unquestionably, totally submitted; he is a dynamic flux in this existence – from moment to moment, from day to day, up and down, well treated or mistreated, respected or disrespected.

With signs and powers bestowed upon him the Prophet Moses walked with the tribe of Israel. No sooner did they cross the Red Sea, however, than the tribe of Israel started craving manufactured idols. As soon as Moses left them for his appointed forty days with Reality on the mountain, they disobeyed him and plunged into habitual disobedience.

Moses immediately recognized that this too was the plot of the Creator. Nature's job is to purify, to constantly strip away in order for everyone to submit if they will. Moses recognized his anger was a product of his expectations – he was not free.

What could he do but be in dynamic submission? What could he do but expect the best from what he was asked to do? Yet, he was always aware that Reality constantly pulls the carpet out from under our feet so that we realize that we cannot count on any earthly stability. Such a man gives in to helplessness and then becomes free of it.

### **Jesus**

The Prophet Jesus was the pure master of the light of abandonment. When he turned the other cheek, he was in a state of total negation; that is, there was no 'he' to be struck. Because he was in a state of utter abandonment, whatever struck him struck Reality. We are liars if we speak the words of the Prophet Jesus without being what he stood for. Because of the discrepancy between

word and actions, Christianity has become merely a romantic notion and a utopian ideal. Jesus came to put back the spirit of the Judaic law into the dead letter of the law which had become the order of the day. Some time after him, however, what was left was a spirit with no clear code or law.

### **Muhammad**

Muhammad acknowledged all of the prophets before him for they all were from the same source; they all had the same light, the same vibrancy, the same transmission. But Muhammad was the last one and the book that came through him, the Qur'an, the book of Allah, had no discrepancies in it. The way of Muhammad is known to us, especially if we look at the successor he appointed and at those who have followed him for centuries.

When we dwell upon the life of Muhammad, we contemplate a brilliant star, the last star in the heavenly revealed knowledges, which heralded the beginning and the end. As far as Allah is concerned, there is no beginning or end because He is the beginning and the end. Muhammad's message encompasses all the other messages that went before it, both in its inner meaning and its outer code of conduct.

Prior to Muhammad's time, humanity had not evolved far enough, both materially and spiritually, to be prepared for all the restrictions, as well as the freedom, that the Divine Creator intended for man.

Three thousand years ago, for example, it would have been impossible to forbid the intake of fermented fruit juices. At that time people did not know enough about preserving, and in the hot desert climate, many food provisions fermented and turned into alcohol so quickly that it was difficult to avoid consuming it even though it produced harmful side-effects. *At a time when their diets consisted solely of easily fermented foods, they could not have been given the luxury of deprivation of consuming fermented drink.*

It took over 23 years during the lifetime of the Prophet for the message to evolve to its completion. It was then that the Prophet said, 'Now the *deen* (religion) is perfected for all

mankind.' He did not ask the people to stop their lifelong habits overnight, nor did he expect them to do so.

However, we cannot behave as the people of Muhammad's time did. We have no excuse for not doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong in its totality, for not allowing what is good for us and forbidding what is not. We follow Muhammad not because he overruled the other prophets and their messages, but because he updated and completed the way of life that is best for humanity at all times and in all places.

The prophet is a being who is infallible; he is in total peace and harmony, witnessing discord and dispersion while being fully anchored in harmonious contentment, as if in the eye of the storm. The prophets, those great men of perfection, occasionally behaved in a manner that displayed human frailty or emotionalism. This behavior did not detract from their noble, divine state.

That frailty is, in fact, a manifestation of Divine Unity and mercy so that the rest of humanity can relate to them. Acts of human frailty are the doors of the sanctified castle through which we can look. They are not moments of weakness. They are the proof of the love of the Creator for all creation through His perfect interlinks.

The prophet is our guide; he holds our hand and shares our experience. He is subjected to all of the tyrannies of life for our sake. He is devoid of egotism and selfishness. He is egoless and selfless; therefore he experiences all.

The closer a prophet is to Allah, the more he may appear in the eyes of his followers to be in affliction. The Prophet Job, the prophet of patience, saw nothing other than the perfection of the Creator in his trials and afflictions. He saw nothing other than the exquisite, magnificent interlink between cause and effect. He brought himself into the interspace between energy and matter; therefore, all of his supplications were accepted. Whatever he asked for was done, for his supplication was the Creator's command. What he asked for had already occurred in destiny. Job, the man living in time, simply reflected that destiny by his supplication.

When we enter the prophetic path, we are basically acknowledging the possibility of our attaining that state of dynamic submission that results in death-life and life-death, in vibrancy in all circumstances. As a result of that indescribable bliss that does not belong to this world, we are total lovers and followers of the Prophet Muhammad. We are also followers and lovers of all the prophets, at all times, wherever they may have lived, in whatever culture, by whatever creed.

*There is no god, but God*

There is only one creed and that is, there is no Reality but Allah. Once we acknowledge that, then we will know how Allah manifests this teaching through the prophets. Then we will understand the meaning of, 'Muhammad is His Prophet'.

To stop short at 'there is no god but God', is to be in the most sensitive and vulnerable state, for ignorance has begun to be removed and one side of the coin of Unity has been revealed. But the coin cannot be taken without the other side being revealed, Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah. We will remain in loss if we have not stumbled across this treasure.

Through an innate knowledge or scholarly reasoning, there have been individuals throughout the ages who have reached the conclusion that there is an all-encompassing, unifying force that holds together the seen and the unseen, life and death, and the two arms of the balancing opposites. But hearing a song is not the same as singing it; reading the menu will not satisfy one's hunger. Acknowledging justice is not the same as being just; having a good intention is not the same as completing the action.

There is only one path and it is based on the One; it is the beginning and the end and it is beyond time. We can only experience this timelessness if we stop the noise in our heads and sit with full consciousness, completely alive, yet completely dead to clutter. Then we will be in a state where we can begin to see the reason why we are in trouble and how to move away from it.

Once we have recognized that anything that happens is perfection, we can begin to act rather than react. Most of our energy is spent in reacting to changes in situations and states, because we have invested interest in maintaining a conducive or desirable state. The reason there is so little

acting is because we spend so much energy in counteracting change or in adjusting to new situations. This situation will continue until there is neutrality in our actions and we begin to act for Reality's sake rather than following our own whims. When this happens, the outcome of our actions will cease to affect us because they will be the outcome of pure and free intentions.

There is no possibility of our constantly living happily and correctly unless we begin to see where we are transgressing. The reason for the rampant spread of crime in our society today is that there are no bounds. Western societies are characterized by outer abundance and inner poverty. The societies of the past were often those of inner abundance and outer poverty. People lived with the continual possibility of death in front of them.

Today we shun any remembrance of death. We do anything we like because we do not constantly see ourselves six feet under ground. The way of unity is to see oneself in the tomb with each flicker of the eye.

If we choose, we can embark on the path of dynamic submission toward self-knowledge. It is for us to act. The laws of reality will not change, but we have the freedom to recognize them and unite our intentions with those laws. If we do, we will progress. If not, we will stagnate and degenerate. We cannot refuse responsibility for our actions for this implies ignorance. We do not want to be ignorant; we want to know.

## ***Chapter 2: The Chase***

We are all looking for a stable foundation on which to build our life experience. We want a reliable foundation for our homes, our communities and our countries. We particularly want a firm foundation for the family because that is the basic unit on which all societies are built.

### *Intentions and Actions*

But our foundations will be solid only if they spring from the one true foundation that existed before we were created and will continue to exist after we die. Because we have different backgrounds and personalities, we each look for this one foundation in our own way. Once we go beyond our outward differences, however, we will find that we are all basically seeking the same thing, although our quest may take different forms.

Sometimes our outer differences are so noticeable that we do not see the similarity in our real goals. But if we go deeply into the reason behind an act of violence, for example, we will find that it ultimately is based on love, although it may have been perverted to such an extent that it manifests in a destructive way. Excessive love of money, for example, might motivate someone to commit a theft. If we look beyond the act itself, however, we will ultimately understand how it all happened.

We all want to understand the underlying motives behind our actions. Each of us already possesses the root of that understanding. Its growth is dependent on its cultivation, exposure and nourishment. These factors govern the depth of our knowledge. Our search always begins with the quest for outer knowledge. We may start, for example, by creating a more suitable environment for ourselves, by having a better room to sit in so we are not disturbed by temperature fluctuations. But the time comes when we are satiated with physical comforts; then we become concerned with feelings. We want to share with people of like mind.

The time may come when we go so deeply into the one true foundation that we discover our total ecological connection with other beings and with everything that happens around us. Such a connection does not imply that there are no boundaries between entities or that we always

understand everything. Rather, this connection means that our inner consciousness can fathom what at first appears incomprehensible; it makes our hearts and intellects sensitive to the incongruous or difficult.

We are meant to understand the external factors that affect us as well as our reactions to these factors. It takes an observer and an observed to create any situation in life. What we call 'I', the product of particular experiences and a particular background, meets an outside occurrence. The resulting interaction brings about a particular situation.

Men and women are expansive by nature. We cannot be contained by our bodily frames; we share on a much wider level through our higher consciousness. If we are travelling in another part of the world and let go of the prejudices – and other limiting factors – that we have been brought up with, we may suddenly find that we have a strong connection with a native of another country, regardless of his status, position or local culture. We may discover that he has fears and suspicions, loves and hates, insecurities and doubts, as we have. The objects of his fears may be different from ours. He may be afraid of the local despots becoming more aggressive, whereas we may be afraid that our government is not sufficiently protective of the small businessman. What we have in common is the experience of fear. The shape it takes may differ.

In a civilized environment, when fear arises in the heart we are taught to curb and repress it, expressing our concern through a newspaper article or support of a political faction. A peasant's fear, however, may lead him to wield an axe and demonstrate violently in his village. The peasant and the sophisticate share the same foundation, but each one's structure is erected differently.

When we discuss the way to self-knowledge, we start from the premise that we all inherently have the same gifts and operate within the same basic parameters. We are all conscious of what is right and what is wrong. Each one of us knows we have certain differences that manifest outwardly. They may be based on habit, environment, or genetic inheritance. Some of these factors may be beyond our control. They are the capital with which we have been endowed; our limitations in some areas may give us advantages in others.

Practically speaking, there is little we can do to improve our situation except to be aware of the tendencies we have. If I am aware that a change in temperature tends to make me more agitated, that very awareness is bound to enable me to be more stable. Likewise, I need to be aware of the effects modern technology may have on me.

One reason why television results in so much frustrated energy is that it is not interactive. When we see violence on the screen most of us want to stop it, but we cannot do anything about it. If we continually expose ourselves to negativity on the screen, we become more and more accommodating to concepts like violence until we finally cease to respond to them.

### *Breaking of Patterns*

If we look closely at our outer differences due to cultural background, we will find they are minimal. One person may like his coffee sweetened; another may not. Many of our differences are merely superficial and based on habit. A willingness to change our habits would obliterate many of our differences, but most of us resent making such changes.

Indeed, one of the main requirements for embarking on the Sufic path is the willingness to turn away completely from what we consider to be essential for our well-being. Then we will suddenly discover how inconsequential these attachments are. When we recognize our dependence on our daily habits and voluntarily let go of these habits, we will find release from our self-inflicted bondage.

We are all the slaves of habit, even in mundane matters like brushing our teeth or combing our hair. We consider our own way of doing things the best way possible and this belief that our way is the best is the cause of a lot of our differences. Once we are able to perceive the real (habitual) cause and our unfounded attachment to our habit, the problem is sublimated.

If we put all these superficial differences aside and regard ourselves as creatures of the moment, remembering the possibility of death at any instant, then a vibrancy and urgency immediately come into our situation that push aside all the outer inconsequential layers, and we find that all

human beings are basically the same. Then we will accept our outer differences and make allowances for the idiosyncrasies of others, recognizing that we, too, have quirks of personality.

Ultimately we will reach a point when we want to know what the next step on the Sufic path is. We will have realized that we have to accept each other as we are and that we have a solid common denominator that we call higher consciousness. This consciousness lets us know deep down what is right and what is wrong; it provides a universal standard of morality.

As we have been witnessing in the last few decades, however, laws around the world have become lower in moral content and more hypocritical to accommodate the power structure, for our societies are based on materialistic rather than moral or humanistic values. The general trend in the world today is one of increasing decadence.

Yet throughout history the positive has always been found alongside the negative. As society moves towards the dishonest and dishonorable, an awareness of the need to strengthen the basic foundations and to re-establish unchanging values will increase. The real virtues of a thousand years ago are also applicable now and will continue to be so in another thousand years. They will not change.

The correct basic relationship between a man and a woman, their rights and duties to each other, for example, have not changed throughout the ages. Such rights and duties whether based on Christian values, or any other true religious values, are all basically the same. If we do not uphold these values, we will end up in a disastrous state, using such crutches as drugs and alcohol to cope with degenerating family life.

We all want to remember positive experiences rather than negative ones, good times rather than bad, for we were all born loving positive elements and wanting to avoid negative ones. Alcohol appears attractive because it helps us forget the past and lessens worry about the future. It makes us a little more spontaneous. The fact that spontaneity can be induced by alcohol means that its root is already within us. It is our responsibility as gardeners of the inner world to cultivate those plants, to develop our natural gifts rather than be dependent on harmful substances.

Why is it that I cannot admit my mistakes and forget my yesterdays, rendering myself open to the future? What keeps me from affirming that whatever comes I will do my best, according to my limitations, and live vibrantly, willing to pay the price for any mistakes I may make? The willingness to face up to one's mistakes does away with guilt, for it is guilt that plagues us if we are not willing to pay the price, whatever it may be.

Once we are fully prepared to accept the consequences of all our actions, good or bad, that thing called guilt, which causes a great sapping of our energy, disappears. We all have a certain amount of energy at our disposal, but that energy is easily dissipated by fear, guilt or unfulfilled expectations.

We have not explored the roots of our original foundation, so we have not dug back into the roots of our inner hearts to find out why we are doing what we are doing; our actions are only as good as the intentions behind them. If our intentions are pure and selfless rather than selfish and pleasure motivated, the outcome will be fulfilling. Eventually the rewards of our actions will be liberating.

### *The Unchanging Laws of Creation*

The laws of reality are inscribed on the stones of the temple of truth. Time cannot change them. We may try to hide, cloak or distort them, but they are unchangeable. We are all seeking to live joyfully and happily, both inwardly and outwardly, but we cannot achieve that unless we are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of all the structures that we are connected to. We must not abuse our bodies by overstraining ourselves mentally, physically or spiritually, for if we undernourish any part, we will pay the price.

The majority of people in the developed world today are suffering from outer excess and inner starvation. We are full of inner loneliness, unable to open our hearts to other people. So we unburden ourselves to psychiatrists for a fee. The psychiatrist is like a man who is constantly repairing a roof whose basic nature is leaky. No sooner has he patched up one hole than another opens up elsewhere. The psychiatrist is not getting to the root of the problem. We cannot be dependent on him or on any other agent; our sole dependency is on Reality, that Entity that

caused us to be. Whenever we develop a dependency on another human being, we generally add resentment, for what we really want are freedom and independence.

Although we are limited by our bodies and by our lifespan, our potential is unlimited. The more deeply we enter into any situation, the more likely we are to reach that strong bedrock upon which the truth is built. But, we have complicated our lives with so much outer sophistication that we find it difficult to dive into the ocean of Reality.

The remedy for our lack of inner nourishment can start by adopting a good or harmless cause, such as supporting an orphanage or feeding the poor. There is a great reward when we find poor people to whom we can give, for it is the giver who is the taker. But the more we learn about the spiritual path, the more we find we are reaching our fundamental bedrock. Then we have faith that our lives do not end with death. We become certain that the Reality that created us is infinite and that we return to it at the end of this life's journey. We know that we have been supported by its grace and nourished by its love and mercy. It is this belief that will help us to create strong families, neighborhoods and nations. Without it, we feel cheated and angry.

Anger springs from an individual's lack of fulfillment. Because he is not getting enough inner nourishment, he becomes dependent on outer stimuli that will eventually drive him to despondency and despair. When we see antisocial or incorrect behavior, we can be sure it is rooted in an individual's or a society's deviation from fundamentals.

Today we are obsessed with outer wealth, finding ourselves inwardly bereft. There is nothing wrong with outer wealth as such, but it needs to be balanced with inner wealth. Otherwise we are like a ship that has a huge hull filled with goods but only a tiny mast. Our ship will topple over under high winds because we do not have a spiritual mast. The wealthy man has less chance to remember death and the fact that he has no right to impose his personal power.

We have no rights in this life, only obligations. We all have a basic obligation toward creation, and whenever we are dissatisfied with life, it is because we have not recognized the fundamentals upon which existence is based. There are certain laws that govern existence, and if we adhere to them, our lives will be fulfilling.

However, if we transgress them, aiming for short-term profitability, we will eventually pay a price for our shortsightedness. Investing in the short-term is the curse of our times. Our forefathers, who invested in the long-term, also benefited in the short-term. They laid out parks and gardens, realizing that if they did not live to enjoy them, their descendants would. It was that love and concern that connected them with life. The Japanese economic strength is based on far-sightedness and sacrifice.

Societies will be destroyed unless they adhere to fundamental values. This does not mean we should live primitively and do away with all our comforts. The question, rather, is, 'Am I the master of my wealth and possessions or do they rule my life?' If the situation rules us, it is because we have acted in ignorance of the boundaries of our systems.

After all, nobody wants to be in turmoil; nobody wants to be constantly in debt, dodging his creditors, erecting still more barriers between himself and the Reality that created him. We all need to recognize the laws of nature and the Infinite without falling into superstitious meaningless rituals. The expressive aspect of a practice is just as important as the philosophy behind it, for one cannot have a living ideology without a code of living. The two go hand in hand.

So the man who believes in the generosity of the Creator must express that belief outwardly. If he genuinely believes in his nothingness and is willing at any moment to give up this gift called life – because he recognizes that after this experience the next gift, which we call death, is more infinite – there will be a transformation in his life that will be reflected in his daily existence. This transformation will bring about coherence in his moral conduct that will provide boundaries for a garden which he will create in the heart – a garden of meaningfulness rather than a plastic imitation of a garden. It is this knowledge that makes the spiritually awakened person have no fear of death.

As a young man travelling in India, I had an intense distaste for any strong odor. A park where I often walked had some beautiful lilies that I loved to look at. But nearby there was a stinking pond which I always tried to avoid. One day a companion dragged me to the pond saying, 'What

you love has its seeds here. From this will come the lilies of the future. It is only a matter of time.'

Sometimes the freshness of someone else's perception enables us to see the cause, which hitherto we have been blind to, of its effect. I was running after the effect – the flowers – not recognizing that its cause was something that seemed on the face of it undesirable.

It is the same with societies. The basis of a moral society may seem unattractive at first glance; it may seem antiquated (usually called backward) to hold on to a bedrock of values for which we may be called on to make sacrifices. However, if we want to live in a safe home, we have to build it well, not shoddily, like many of the houses of today. If we want something that is constant and real, we have to imitate the unchangeable way of nature.

Realizing that the laws that govern the outer and the inner are interlinked will enable us to adhere to them even though they may seem to go against us. 'Speak the truth even though it is against you,' says an Arab proverb. We will find everything eventually comes to us even though at the time a situation may appear adverse.

If we have tenacity, the rewards will come – but not without the companionship and support of people who share this path and enable us to live within the bounds. Once we recognize that the knowledge of these bounds is engraved on everyone's heart, our sailing will be balanced and our mast strong. We will continuously call upon the Infinite Reality, upon our own higher consciousness, to gauge whether our action is correct. Are we acting out of self-interest or out of desire for pure service? Each of us must be our own judge.

The Qur'an says, 'Nay, man will be evidence against himself, even though he were to put up his excuses.' The Qur'an also talks about the day when there are no more excuses and every cell will bear witness, for every cell contains the whole story.

We are all subject to certain absolute laws whether we like them or not. Once we recognize this, our limited existence has the potential of being a glorious experience. We must regard our life as diminishing capital, respecting every moment, counting every breath.

Instead, we have become so isolated and insular that we do not recognize the infinite capital we have, contained in a finite situation called time. Time, as we know, is relative; when we are content, the moment stretches so we lose track of its length. On the other hand, when we are waiting for a train, or for the bank manager to approve a loan application, time moves slowly. Contentment and tranquility relate to least (or infinite) time, whereas disturbance makes us aware of time.

Ultimately, we are all responsible for our own lives, although we may try to blame adverse situations on a bad husband or wife, the neighbors, society or the government. The government is as good as the people who support it. The people in the developing countries constantly complain about being ruled by tyrants. But they have deviated in their lives from the tenets of true moral conduct. They have inherited a code of conduct but have not guarded it properly, so they deserve the bad rulers they have. Now they have to struggle, sacrifice and regain their lost heritage.

In Western societies, where much is inherited from the hard work of previous generations, most are now born into comfort. But whatever begins with ease ends with difficulty, for if we have not paid the price for the ease, we will not recognize the value of the effort that was needed: 'Easy come, easy go.'

Everything is just; the justice of God prevails everywhere. In the next life, we are promised, there will be no more 'we', only the pure and simple recognition of what is called *ruh* – spirit. Its state will be as good as it was the moment it left this life. If it has been liberated in this life, then when it goes into the post-death, non-time zone, that state of freedom is perpetuated for infinity.

But it is no use talking about the after-life when we all want to live in the state of the garden here and now. We can cultivate a lovely garden only if we know and apply its true foundation. We must not simply adhere to outer restrictions as though to survive an inspection, changing them after the inspector departs. The inspector is within us. Each of us contains an in-built, cybernetic system from which there is no escape.

### ***Chapter 3: The Veil***

The Sufic tradition provides the seeker with a complete guide to the major steps in the journey toward self-knowledge. It also answers a number of questions that arise once we have embarked on the quest for Reality. What is it that prevents us from seeing the hand of Divine Unity in life and Oneness in diversity? What keeps us from spontaneously acting according to it? Why do we continue to afflict ourselves with our attachments? We need to examine some terms found in Sufism that will enlarge the dimensions of our understanding.

#### *The Seven Patterns of the Self*

The word *nafs* is a key term in the Sufi tradition. The literal translation from the Arabic is 'self', and, in fact, *nafs* contains the entire spectrum of meanings included in the English word 'self'. The Arabic speaker knows which sense of *nafs* is meant by the context. The words, *nafs* and *nafas*, derive from the same root, which means 'breath'. *Tanafus*, the act of breathing, is based on two opposite happenings: inhaling air and exhaling it. There are a number of verses in the Qur'an that call for us to reflect on the nature of the *nafs*, for example: 'And the self and Him Who made it perfect. Then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong with it.' In our reflection we ask, 'Is the self inspired to transgress or to be pious?'

Every person contains within him two opposing elements – the movement towards transgression and the movement towards piety. But awareness comes through recognizing boundaries and through the knowledge that transgression will cause us only affliction and danger.

In the Sufic system, the spectrum of self is composed of seven degrees, ranging from the highest to the lowest. Shades of grey exist between these stages, for the divisions between them are not completely discernible or quantifiable.

### **The Commanding Self**

The lowest level of *nafs* is called the commanding self. The name implies that this self commands one to do whatever comes to mind. Neither emotional, nor rational, nor intellectual appeals get through to people in whom this self predominates. They are totally without guilt and nothing will stop them from acting out their whims. This *nafs* is impenetrable, despotic and solidified in its selfishness.

### **The Blaming Self**

The second level is the blaming self. This self occasionally questions its wrong actions. This questioning indicates a crack in the solidity of the egoism of the self, allowing a beam of light to shine upon its reality and to occasionally reflect.

### **The Creative Self**

The third level of *nafs* is the creative and tolerant *nafs*. When we are in an artistic or creative mood, we do not have many fears or anxieties and are open to inspiration. From the Sufic viewpoint, this pleasant self is in danger because its very open-mindedness threatens the laws of correct behavior to which creation is subject.

It is the open-minded self that says all right to everything and that anything goes. Like mercury on a table, this self jumps in every direction. It is the 'why not?' attitude. It is like a man of seventy who, having never skied in his life, suddenly decides he would like to try it. He will probably topple over and spend months in hospital recuperating from his injuries. Although the inspired self may find itself in trouble, it can also foster hope because of its flexibility. Most people who embark on a spiritual path start from this level of tolerance and liberalism because they are willing to see their own folly.

### **The Secure Self**

The fourth level is the secure, certain self. The Qur'an reminds the self that is in that state of certainty to turn to its Sustainer, to return to the knowledge which it was given before its creation and to return to the state it was in before it could understand time, to return to its source, to its Lord.

Security and certainty begins with trust. Through trust we come to know. Because we want goodness and contentment in this life, it seems natural to accept the hypothesis that these states are attainable. Otherwise why should human beings have these desires? At a given moment, we may be unhappy and in trouble, but have faith that eventually we will come to know the cause behind our situation and learn how to extricate ourselves from it.

Setting out on the spiritual path, the seeker begins with the trust that what he is seeking must be right and attainable, although he has not fully reached it yet. As he daily progresses along the path, he finds he is in greater equilibrium as the level of his self-awareness rises. There is more connection between his inner intentions and outer actions. His trust helps to increase his contentment and security, and he is more steady and stable.

So we begin the path progressing from random inspiration into inspiration that is based on a discipline and on a trust that we will come to know. We embark on a path that we know is going to benefit us both immediately and in the days to come. This knowledge must be based on an inner reality and trust; how else can we talk about an end that neither you nor I can perceive or conceive of?

### **The Contented Self**

The fifth level is the contented self. This contentment is based on the knowledge that whatever happens is the best outcome (for it is real), for reasons we can or cannot see. We are content with the ups and downs of life; content even when illness strikes. We may not fully comprehend the entirety of our situation; we may not realize the extent to which we have overworked ourselves; we may not understand that the germs that attack us only speed up the recycling process of wasted cells or tissue. They never attack an organ that is in a good state.

Contentment does not imply passive acceptance. It arises only when we feel that we have done our best. We are not content when we know that others or we ourselves could have been more aware or done more. Failing to do our best indicates inefficiency. We do not like inefficiency because nature and Allah's Way is the perfect way, the most efficient way, and we all strive for perfection in whatever we embark on, even if we occasionally find excuses to stop halfway and blame our mistakes on other people or circumstances. There is always an inner urge or drive.

The anchored self, the self that is sure, is content that it will come to know. It does not know now because it has been viewing everything through colored, thick, and cloudy spectacles. It does not understand the total picture, but sees each situation in the microscopic or microcosmic. In reality, however, we are each a microcosm containing the meaning of the macrocosm.

So the contented self is the self that begins the spiritual journey and commits itself to the undertaking; it will not stop short until it comes to know the cause of its existence. How else can we be content? Otherwise we have only the certainty of eventual physical death and of being left, after all the experiences of the average human life, as food for the worms of the graveyard.

The contented self matures with knowledge. We have all been given a light of consciousness, which emerges after the mind has been tethered. *'Aql* in Arabic indicates the faculty of reasoning. It is usually translated in English as 'mind', but a better translation would be 'intellect' or 'reason'.

The Arabic headgear is called *'aqqaal*. It is actually one cord twisted into a double circle and put on the head. As an item of dress, it is a functional device used to secure a piece of material that shades the head from the sun, but its other role is to tether the leg of a camel, so the beast sits down and behaves itself.

The origin of *'aqqaal* is the word that means 'to be tethered'; if we are tethered it is by the faculty of reason. This faculty of reason is within us all if we stop the mind and allow ourselves to be quieted. It is for this reason that those of us who are spiritually inclined want to reflect. We want to stop the so-called mind and go wandering off. Access to Reality begins when the process of contentment, in a positive dynamic sense, leads to the contented self. I am content; hence I see more clearly. I see the despot within me. I see the blameworthy and the inspired within me, and I see the highest potential within me. I see freedom and timelessness within me.

### **The Pleasing Self**

From this contentment emerges an immense inner stability and wealth that leads to the sixth level, the pleasing self. If we are content with every circumstance and situation that occurs in our lives, we will realize, spontaneously rather than analytically, the complexity of precision and perfection that causes each situation to occur. We may not like what we see; we may not expect it; but we will see the perfect truth in it.

We may, for example, have had certain expectations about our child's ability or performance. In the event that he has not behaved as expected, we are disappointed. Once we see that we overestimated the child's maturity, our understanding of our miscalculations will bring about knowledge and contentment. This state of contentment and understanding will not prevent us from acting positively to rectify a situation, or from assessing the possibilities for action from a balanced standpoint.

To reach the stage of the pleasing self means that everything in existence that interacts with us is content with us, for if we are content then the reaction or reflection is that everything else is content with us. There is no separation. We become secure in the knowledge that no matter what situation we are in, ultimately we will reap a return from all our actions toward others.

Our actions are investments that will pay off, one way or another. The person who is at this stage is, therefore, in complete equilibrium because he is aware of what is going on within himself and is connected to the world. He is also able to see clearly how he will, in time, reap the fruit of all his actions.

### **The Perfect Self**

The seventh and ultimate level of the *nafs* is the perfect self. This is the state of perpetual spontaneous awareness.

One is essentially pure consciousness. If that pure light is directed at the lower end of the spectrum it will only encourage and propagate baser energies. If, however, it is directed towards the pure spontaneous state that we all aspire to and whose potential exists within the amazing complex physical mechanism, we will recognize that the limitations we face in this existence are

there only to bring about knowledge of the unlimited. Then our direction is clear, it being to taste the limitless within, and living with these physical limitations becomes the most wonderful experience.

Sometimes one drives the body beyond its limit of endurance, this is caused by misdirecting our continuous drive to go beyond limitation. The limitless is to be experienced within. The body is the limited 'take off' platform, we have to learn this subtle differentiation and apply our energy appropriately.

Once we realize the full spectrum of the various unknown areas within our so-called self and we begin to see it spontaneously, our afflictions are likely to lessen. If at the moment anger rises within us, we see that it is an expression of disappointment at being deflected from achieving a desire, we are then more likely to understand our miscalculation, and our anger will probably subside.

This does not mean that the spiritual seeker does not get upset. He may be very angry when he sees injustice, but there spontaneously arises in him a mechanism that brings about a practical outcome. Is there anything he can do about the situation? Can he stop the man from beating the child? If not, how can he ensure that it does not happen again?

If we are living in an environment that is degenerating because of its abandonment of virtuous values, ultimately a time will come when we are obligated by our teachings and by the precepts of our Perfect Masters to leave it, because that community or neighborhood along with whoever belongs to it is doomed. Indeed, the blessed Prophet Muhammad said that a time might come when each of his followers would have no choice but to take a goat and seek refuge at the top of a mountain. He meant that a time would come when the situation in the world would be so decadent and hypocritical that a man of knowledge and truth would want to get away from the chaos and confusion he saw around him because he would not be able to do anything to change it.

There is a story about a seeker who, as he was approaching a town one day, saw a man running out of the gates of the city in great anguish. The seeker asked what was wrong. The man replied, 'There is nobody in this town who wants knowledge, so flee from such a place'.

One of the great masters of Sufism was asked to define the Sufic Path. He said Sufism had been a reality without a name, but now it was a name without a reality. At the end of his life, Imam Junayd was found weeping. Asked the reason for his tears, he said: 'I have roamed all over Baghdad [then considered the great city of knowledge], and I have not found one heart that is ready to receive what I am transmitting.'

This overall situation never changes. It is the same today. As we get older, we all conclude that quality in the world is deteriorating. Throughout the ages older people have shared this belief. All the great masters have said that their own time was the worst of times. They cannot all have been the worst, but as our knowledge broadens with age and experience, we tend to see more conflict and disturbance.

From the standpoint of Reality, however, this is not the whole story. We know from the law of opposites that the more darkness there is, the greater is the potential for light. In maximum darkness, the tiniest spark shines brightly. Today, for instance, if we spend a few minutes of our day helping others, everybody praises us because there are few who sacrifice any time at all.

One day, A`isha, the young and outspoken wife of the Prophet Muhammad, said something completely out of place. The Prophet told her that it was the *shaytan* in her speaking. In Arabic the word *shaytan* comes from *shatana*, meaning to be cast off or far away from the path. There can be no 'on' unless there is 'off', no divine light unless there is evil. Our creation is based on duality in order to see that opposites emanate from the same source, so that the bounds are known. We cannot have good without evil, dark without light. When A`isha asked the Prophet, 'What about your *shaytan*?' He replied, 'My *shaytan* has given up. He is in submission, in Islam.' He meant that as negative tendencies arose in him, he recognized them and, with his instant recognition, banished them. This recognition comes from a state of constant awareness. These varying aspects of the *nafs* are within us all but they can be improved as we progress along the path of knowledge, if we have a clear direction, guidance and adhere to the limits.

These models or states of the self are only hooks for the mind to latch on to, so we can say, ‘This is my lower self, my selfishness, arrogance or vanity.’ All of us possess negative qualities. The only difference is that the man of spiritual insight will immediately see his arrogance, vanity or selfishness and seek refuge in the Creator. He will recognize the negative tendencies within him and their destructive potential. If he is a businessman, for example, he will recognize that arrogance is one of the principal causes of financial downfall.

There is an Arabic saying, ‘The mistake of a man of reason (and wisdom) is a big one because when he makes a mistake it is as large as his reason.’ We have all seen examples of a man who has lived correctly and responsibly throughout his life but suddenly at the end he makes a terrible mistake that causes his total ruin. Such an occurrence happens because he is not on a real spiritual path with clear bounds that show him how to behave in every circumstance.

The greatest master of Sufism was Imam Ali, the son-in-law and closest companion of the Prophet. All Sufi paths except one connect with him. He lived the life of a man of outward poverty, choosing always to dress in a patched robe.

When he was elected as a leader of the Muslims, he responded to the request reluctantly and continued to live frugally. One day he visited the home of a wealthy man who had prepared a lavish banquet in his honor. He asked his host, ‘You have cared very much for this life. Have you invested in the same way for the next?’ The man said, ‘I have a brother who loves you and imitates you. We will bring him to you; he will please you.’ The brother arrived in a dusty patched robe and Imam Ali said to him, ‘What a miserable condition you are in. Why do you dress like this?’ The man answered, ‘I love you and I am imitating you.’

Imam Ali replied, ‘But you are not me. I am afflicted with governorship and I want to live in such a way that the majority of the people will have access to me. Most of the people’s living standard here is like this and I do not wish to be above them. Also, I want to show that it is not the garb that you wear that matters; it is who you are and what you represent. You who have been endowed with this wealth and well-being should show your gratitude to the Creator and the environment that has enabled you to have it by dressing as well as you can.’

The great-grandson of Imam Ali, Imam Jafar as-Sadiq, who is one of the pillars of our teachings, was wearing fine clothing one day, when he was approached by someone who questioned him, ‘Your great-grandfather Imam Ali, who was our greatest master, always wore a patched robe. Why do you wear such fine clothes?’ The Imam replied, ‘Am I not dressed in garments quite commonly found in the marketplace of Madinah?’ The man agreed.

Imam Jafar then said, ‘As a master of the people, I like to wear what is available to the people. I do not like to exalt myself by calling attention to my dress (by wearing a patched robe or any special dress). However, if it was left to my personal preference, I would be wearing what I am wearing underneath this fine robe.’ And he lifted up his sleeve to expose a threadbare, yellowed robe.

The *nafs* patterns we have been discussing exist in us all, but the more we dwell unnecessarily on the limitations of the level we are at, the more we reinforce them. It is for this reason we find contemporary psychology to be of little use, for it only serves to highlight a problem that in reality does not exist. The *nafs* is like a thief; the more we see it the more it runs away. Where is our anger? Once we have seen it, it disappears. What about our irrational insecurity? The problems we had last year have disappeared; our current ones will also disappear in time.

These patterns of the *nafs* are the shields that veil our eyes from the eternal truth. You and I hide the one and only Reality, which dwells in us all. But the way to recognize the infinite truth is by the recognition of the limited self. This is the meaning of ‘He who knows himself knows his Lord.’

So we start by recognizing what goes on in ourselves; seeing that all our higher aspirations can only be achieved by recognizing the lower ones as they arise. The further we go on the path, the more we see everything disappear except the perfect beauty and mercy of God that encompasses all. Then we will melt into the one and only network of Truth, and our spiritual life as opposed to a merely physical life will begin.

Each one of us must choose whether to utilize our God-given potential. Time is short and our tendency is to postpone a decision. But if we invest a little of our time in the spiritual life now,

that investment will blossom. If we dedicate a small proportion of our time to God's purposes, our investment will be amply rewarded. As our dedication and sincerity to the cause of Reality increases, so too, will the rewards. For our life is our investment; we are its portfolio.

Eventually, if we continue along this path, we will find that all these self patterns come and go like bubbles. Eventually what is left is the Truth that possesses, encompasses and permeates us. This can only happen if there are boundaries, for there cannot be freedom without limitations. If we do not know the meaning of constriction, how can we know the meaning of freedom? The more we are tethered, the more we are free, until we come to a point where we have absolutely no choice because we are living the moment. Then we taste life itself. Then and only then, we are qualified to talk about true meditation.

Having recognized our *nafs* pattern, everything become easier and lighter. As a result of that light-heartedness we begin to see the light of truth, for we are nothing other than the light. The Qur'an describes God as being the light of the heavens and the earth. That light burns in every heart, provided that it is a heart and not a bank vault locked behind steel barriers.

Each one of us has to discover how to live our own life fully. We cannot stop at second-hand knowledge. The spiritual path is for the adventurer (to add to the venture not to be reckless), for the one who truly desires, who has the right sensibility, who recognizes that with every breath he is moving closer to the end of this life experience. He wants to know life's meanings and his beginning. Once he knows the beginning, he knows his end. With that knowledge there will come a transformation that is possible for every one of us if only we are willing to abandon ourselves to it.

## **PART IV: POSTSCRIPT**

### ***Postscript***

We have seen that the nature of existence is based on two opposites. We find either increase or decrease, wideness or narrowness, elevation or abasement, strength or weakness, giving or withholding, expansion or contraction, gatheredness or dispersion, happiness or sadness, life or death. Outwardly, life is experienced by duality, moving from one state to its opposite.

The nature of the inward is different from that of the outward. The basic nature of the inward follows along a singular path, rather than leading to a two-pronged outward experience. If we reflect deeply, we will find that the root of these opposites is a single source. If we trace any of these attributes to its root, we will reach a singular point. It is only through the porthole of integrated awareness that the unifying network of the outward can be seen.

We are in this world, yet our higher nature is beyond this world. Our bodies are borrowed and will perish, but our spirit is from a source that is beyond time and, therefore, its nature is permanent.

Thus part of the perfection of the work of Allah is that He made this existence based on two. He created everything in pairs so that the knowledge of things is by their opposites. By His creating duality, we know that He is One.

This is by the uniqueness of the oneness of Allah, the One, the Unique.

Therefore, the witnessing of that which is unique and has no opposite is so bewildering that it would almost render it unmanifest. Its non-manifestation is because of its excessive clarity, and its deflection is due to its dazzling brilliance.

So we praise the One Who is hidden from His creation because of His intense appearance and Who is hidden from them because of His effulgent light. There is no place or time that He is not. His existence precedes non-existence, and His Foreverness precedes beginning.

A master of our path, Imam AH Zain Al-Abideen, raised this knowledge of duality to its highest point of worship of the One, as he supplicates:

O God, make me adore and worship You,  
But corrupt not my worship with self-satisfaction.  
Bring about good toward mankind by my hand,  
But effect it not by my expectation of their gratitude,  
And protect me from vainglory.

O God, bless Muhammad and his descendants,  
Lift me not a single degree before mankind,  
Without diminishing me accordingly in my own eyes,  
And give rise in my soul to an inward shame,  
Of the same measure.

I witness that there is no god, but Allah,  
And that Muhammad is His Prophet.  
No power and no strength except by Allah.  
The Glorious One.

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