

THE MYSTICAL TRADITION OF ISLAM

A Compilation of Articles from the Mystic's Vision

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The religion of Islam was founded in Arabia by Muhammed (d. 632), whose book, the *Quran* or *Koran*, constitutes the final authority and credo for all who claim Islam as their religion. Though Muhammed claimed that the book was inspired by God, whom he calls *Allah*, it contains much that is derived from ancient Jewish and Christian sources. Muhammed set forth in the *Quran*, by the use of many anecdotes and commentaries, a number of moral precepts and social laws, which did much in the 7th century to transform a diversified group of lawless nomadic tribes into a united God-fearing nation. And while the *Quran* is essentially a book of moral principle and faith, it contains many statements by Muhammed which may be interpreted as mystical in nature.

Following upon the death of Muhammed, a number of devout mystics belonging to the Islamic faith appeared throughout the Middle East, spreading from Arabia to Egypt, Iraq, Persia, Turkey, and Afghanistan. They came to be known as *Sufis*, from the word for “wool”—apparently because of the woolen garments worn by these gnostics to set them apart as “knowers” of God. While the mainstream faithful of Islam were busily engaged in the spread of their religion through territorial conquest during the 8th and 9th centuries, the Sufis were teaching the pure love of God, and living an ascetic life aimed at realizing Him in the depths of their souls.

Among the best known and revered of these early Sufis were Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), Rabi'a Adawiyya, the slave-girl of Basra (d. 801), Dhu'n-Nun, the Egyptian (d. 859), Beyizid Bistami, the Persian (d. 874), and Abu'l-Husayn an-Nuri, the Iraqi (d. 907). All were great lovers of God, and each of them greatly influenced the mystical mood of their time. Their love of God took the form of a one-pointed yearning for union with Him, for the “vision of His Face”; and their writings often resembled the arduous outpourings of a lover to his beloved.

For the Sufis, the path of love is the Way by which the soul makes the involute journey to the awareness of her own true identity. And the prayerful songs of love sung by the Sufis are the expressions of the soul's yearning to return in awareness to her eternal Source and Ground. She searches inwardly for her pristine state, her Beloved, her Lord; and subdues herself, dissolving herself, as it were, by reducing her own being to her pristine simplicity and ultimate non-being. She renounces all regard for herself, divests herself of all fascination with manifested phenomena, both inner and outer; and, drawn by a one-pointed love and desire for God, is brought at last to silence. Then the illusory duality of soul and God is no more; the awareness of the one Self dawns with supreme clarity, knowing who It has always been, knowing Its eternal freedom and joy.

Such a description of the soul's inner "pilgrimage" makes it appear a simple and clear-cut process, but it is the most difficult accomplishment that can be performed, for the ego-soul does not die without a fight. It wages a tireless and bitter warfare against its own attraction to God, and fights with all the fury and panic of a drowning man struggling to sustain his existence; it incessantly asserts its love of the manifested world and life, and restlessly strives to create a diversion from its path toward God. Torn in two directions, the soul suffers, on the one hand, the agonies of annihilation, and on the other, the painful prolonging of its failure to reach its avowed Goal. Only when it comes at last, by the grace of God, to that point where it surrenders all other objectives for God alone does it become capable of reaching its cherished Goal; divinely inspired by the desire for God alone, it makes that leap into the consciousness of universal Being.

In the writings of the early Sufis, and in particular, those of Dhu'n-Nun, this path of divine love for God, culminating in vision, or *gnosis*, is charted as a path (*tariq*) marked by several distinct advances, or stations. The entering upon the path originates with a call from God and the assent of the individual will to embark on the journey. This "call" is an awakening of the heart, which is affected solely by God's grace, serving to draw the wandering soul back to its true home and divine source. This awakening might be precipitated by the meeting with a *Shaikh* (spiritual Master), or through a reading of the words of one of the mystics who had traveled the path of divine love and reached its goal.

The actual journey along the spiritual path begins with the station of Repentance (*tauba*). "Repentance," said Jalaluddin Rumi, "is a strange mount; it jumps toward heaven in a single moment from the lowest place." A man may have led an utterly despicable life prior to the awakening of the soul, but once that awakening takes place, he immediately wipes clean the entire slate of the past, and utterly

transforms his own mind and will by the intense remorse he feels for all the little acts of wicked selfishness performed theretofore. He is filled with shame and regret for every instance of hurt given to another, because his heart is now filled with pity and love for all humanity struggling to find the joy and understanding he has now found through God's grace. Such remembrance of one's own stupidity in the previous state of ignorance is also a great humbler of what pride one might otherwise be tempted to feel in the possession of that grace.

The next station is that of Faith or Surrender To God (*tawakkul*). The mental agitation resulting from fear for one's own welfare, which may afflict the novice when he chooses to give all his thought to God, is dispelled by the calm remembrance that it is He who has called the soul to Him, and that He will nourish and provide for the body as well. Surrendering all thoughts of his own bodily welfare, he gives everything into the hands of God, and says, "Lead me wheresoever Thou wilt." This attitude was expressed by Jesus to his disciples when he told them to take no thought for the morrow: "Do not worry and say, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we wear?' Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. Seek first His kingdom and all these things shall be given to you." This may lead to Poverty (*faqr*), and often does; but if this poverty is necessary to the freedom to contemplate God, so be it. To those who have been thus led to it, this poverty is the true and greatest wealth.

The next station is that of Patient Endurance (*sabr*), a great necessity for the soul called to the contemplation of God. Calm acceptance of the rigors of such a life is necessary to the stability of the soul, which must pass through many ordeals, and many temptations that arise in the mind. Next, and allied with Patient Endurance, is Joy In Affliction (*rida*). When the soul is free to focus its attention on God, it enjoys an inner bliss, which cannot be dislodged by any outward occurrence, no matter how unpleasant. Its joy is derived from a source entirely untouched by worldly pains or pleasures, and therefore the soul remains unaffected by them, reveling solely in the proximity of the Beloved. The soul, burdened by afflictions, has only to remember God to rise above all earthly pain, and know the healing caress of imperturbable bliss.

However, following that sweet time, comes another, often referred to as "The Dark Night Of The Soul"; the Sufis call it *gabd*. This is a state of dryness and emptiness, when the soul, struggling to become completely selfless, egoless, has not yet reached the ultimate degree of extinction, and suffers the heavy sense of death, with no light of superconscious life yet visible. It is a dry, awful, sense of one's own nothingness, one's own emptiness, which may be likened to the

darkness experienced while going through a dark tunnel when the light at the other end cannot yet be seen. The ego-self is withered, dried-up, and all but gone; but the greater Selfhood has not yet revealed Itself. The suffering soul feels great agony in the lack of both worldly and spiritual consolation; and worse, it imagines that it has been damned and relegated forever to its present hell, and thus suffers all the more.

Then comes the revelation of Love and Spiritual Knowledge (*mahabba* and *ma'rifa*). The soul awakens to an incredibly clear awareness that embraces both divine Love and Knowledge. It is an inner realization by the soul that the God it sought is all-inclusive Love, and the soul experiences that Love within itself. It knows that This is the sustaining Power and guide of all its life. And it vows to surrender all else for the sake of being filled throughout life with this perfect Love. With great joy, the soul is refreshed, and sings: “Thou art my God, the sole Father of my being, the sweet breath of Love that lives in my heart; and I shall follow Thee, and live with Thee, and lean on Thee till the end of my days.”

This experience of divine Love may be likened to the corona of the Sun; it is fully Light, yet it has a still deeper Source. And this Love, while fully complete, yet yearns for its own source, its own center of radiance; and so, while this Love is the fulfilling Light itself, it is drawn by longing to Itself. Says Rumi: “The hearts of the wise are the nests of love, and the hearts of the lovers are the nests of longing, and the hearts of the longing are the nests of intimacy.” The longing of the lover for God is often compared to that of a worldly lover for her beloved. The soul so blessed, or afflicted, with divine Love has no other thought or desire but to reach her Beloved. She weeps sweet tears of love nightly and calls in her heart for death at her Beloved’s feet. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she longs to be annihilated in her Beloved’s embrace, and so to enjoy the ultimate intimacy of union with her beloved God.

It is this love-longing which leads to the station of Annihilation (*fana*). This is the profoundly transformative experience referred to in other traditions as *nirvana*, *samadhi*, or “the vision of God.” For, at the moment the ego is extinguished, the eternal and all- pervasive “I” is realized. It is an experience that overturns all previous conceptions of God and the soul. Previously, there was a relationship: of the soul to God, the lover to the Beloved; but now, the ego-soul is no more. The false sense of selfhood, which is part of the illusion of phenomenal existence, has been erased, and only the Real, the One, exists. What shall we call It? The *Dharmakaya* of the Buddhists? The *Atman* of the Vedantists? The “One” of Plotinus? The Sufis call It *Haqq*, “the Real.”

Scholars may imagine that a Buddhist experiences one thing, a Vedantist another, and so forth; but one who has experienced It, whether a Sufi, Christian or Hindu, knows that It is the final Truth, the only One. There are not different Unities, one for each sect or denomination; there is only one One, and it is That which is experienced by Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis alike. It should be obvious that, if there is such a thing as Unity, and if It can be experienced, then the experience must be the same for all; since Unity, by its very definition, by its very nature, is one. So what, if that One is called by different names in different lands! In every place and in every generation, new terms are ever being invented in the hope of elucidating the knowledge of Unity.

All phenomenal existence comes into being by the power of that One. This makes an apparent two; but it is really only one. The appearance of two is just the result of the “imaginary” juxtaposition of subject and object. But, of course, the subject and the object are the same One. It is this Unity that is realized when the soul reaches the station of *fana*. When the ego-mind is dissolved, having been drawn to its extinction by its own Source, there is no longer a subject-object relationship. There is only the Unnamable, beyond all subject-object predications. It is what has been called by the Sufis, *jam*, or “Unity.”

The Upanishadic seers of this Unity declared that, “When one realizes Brahman, he becomes Brahman.” “When I died to myself,” says the Sufi, “I became the Beloved.” “I have ceased to exist, and have passed out of self,” said Rabi’a; “I am one with Him and entirely His.” It is from the standpoint of this experience of Unity that al-Hallaj declared, *ana’l Haqq*, “I am He”; and Bistami exclaimed, “Glory be to Me! There is nothing under my garment but He.” For, after such a revelation, if one is to speak the truth, he can no longer make a distinction between “me” and “Thee.” He knows full well that there is no other in all the universe but that one “I.” If he makes the slightest separation between “I” and “Thou,” he has forfeited the Truth, and re-established Duality. How strange and baffling, that only moments before, he was a soul on fire with love; and now he is enjoined by the Truth revealed to him to forget about souls and desire for union.

One might imagine this experience of *fana* to be the final station on the Sufi path, but, in Sufism, as in nearly every mystical tradition, there is recognized to be a further, final, station on the journey to perfection. This ultimate summit of spiritual attainment is called Retention of Identity (*baqa*). This is the state of one living continuously in the enlightened awareness of Unity. It is the state of the *jivanmukta* of Vedanta; the state of Buddhahood of the Buddhists; the Beatitude of

the Christians; the Sagehood of the Taoists. *Baqa*, the final and ultimate station, is nothing less than the continuous retention of the awareness of Unity throughout one's life; in every moment and breath, to live in the awareness of one's true, all pervasive, Identity. This is the perfect life of freedom, contentment, and utter surrender of the soul to the will of God within.

We find this state of perfection described by the Taoist, Lao Tze, by the *Bhagavad Gita*, by the Avadhut, by the Christians, Zen Buddhists, and all the enlightened saints of all time; yet all have declared as well that this state is beyond description. "The Way that can be told is not the true Way," said Lao Tze; it would make no sense at all to those unprepared for it by inner experience, and besides, no words can tell just what the life of such a man is like. It must be lived to know it. Such a man may teach, or he may not teach; he may beg for his food or he may labor for it; he may be fat or he may be thin; he may write books or he may appear a simpleton; but the joy is the same. He may be a Sufi or a Jew; he may be a Buddhist or an Avadhut, a Christian or a Sikh, a farmer or a monk; but the joy is the same.

Naturally, it is very difficult for people at a lower station of knowledge to recognize or appreciate the view of one at the highest station, and it is because of this that the unilluminated so often deride and persecute the saints. On the other hand, one who has reached the final state cannot malign the preliminary stations as incorrect; for it was by the ascension of the path, by way of these very stations, that he arrived at his Goal. Once there, he sees that all the people of the world are at the station on the path to which they have individually arrived by God's Grace. How can he fault their ignorance? If anyone at all can understand him or even hear his voice, it is those at the stations most near to him. The great majority of men are far below him and must imagine him to be a madman. As Lao Tze has said, "If it were not the highest Truth, it would not be laughed at by the majority of people."

Within Islam, as within all religious traditions, there are individuals of varying degrees of spiritual experience and understanding, with the mystic standing at the highest degree, opposed at the other end of the scale by those pious and pretentious people whose understanding of spiritual experience is dim. These two contrary elements within any religious tradition tend naturally to conflict mightily with one another; and, in Islam, as elsewhere, this conflict has often resulted in the extreme persecution and martyrdom of the mystics.

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A Few Representative Islamic Mystics:

I. AL-HALLAJ

One of the most persecuted martyrs of the Islamic faith was a man known as al-Hallaj. Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) was an Arab, born in the province of Fars, and spent most of his life in the city of Baghdad. He became a disciple of ‘Amr al-Makki and also of the famous Sufi teacher, al-Junayd of Persia (d. 910). At some time during his discipleship, al-Hallaj attained the realization of Unity, and realized his identity to be the Identity of the One. But when he spoke of it, he found that both al-Makki and al-Junayd had no inkling of such an experience and refused to acknowledge that what al-Hallaj said was true. It seemed to them quite contrary to the teaching of the Prophet, and therefore a dangerous heresy.

Al-Hallaj, around this time, became married to the daughter of a well-known religious teacher; but the girl’s father also became turned against al-Hallaj when he began speaking of the unity of his own soul with God. In al-Hallaj’s own home, his father-in-law regarded him as “a miserable infidel.” It was then he began writing in poetic verse of what he had realized, in order to make known to his fellow Sufis what he had known to be the Truth. He wrote of his search for God by the path of loving prayer, and his eventual experience of Unity, declaring, “I am the Truth,” “I am the Reality” (*ana’l Haqq*); but very few of his writings have survived, due to their being regarded as blasphemous and heretical in his own time.

In his writings, al-Hallaj attempted to explain that his saying, “*ana’l Haqq*,” was not heretical, by comparing his own saying to the similar declarations of Satan and the Egyptian Pharaoh in certain mythological stories. He argued that, whereas the “I” of the Pharaoh’s saying, “I am your highest Lord,” and Satan’s “I am the Highest,” referred to the personal “I,” the ego; his own “I” was an “I” devoid of ego, referring not to the personal self, but to the one “I” of all. Said al-Hallaj:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I; we are two
spirits dwelling in one body. If you see me, you see Him; and if
you see Him, you see us both. ¹

These words of his were very similar to those of Jesus, who had experienced the same revelation; and they met with a similar response. Both his old friends and teachers, al-Makki and al-Junayd, went to the *ulama*, the guardians of Islamic faith, and accused al-Hallaj of propagating a false and heretical doctrine.

The antagonism mounted against him by the *ulama* became too oppressive, and al-Hallaj was forced to leave Baghdad. He travelled for five years, meeting with other Sufis in Khurasan, and in Mecca. It is said that when he made pilgrimage to Mecca, four hundred disciples accompanied him. In the year 905, at the age of forty-seven, he took a boat to northern India, where the Muslim empire had already begun to establish itself. He traveled through Gujerat, Sind and the lower Indus Valley, presumably meeting with and teaching the Sufis living there. It is not known how long he stayed in India, nor if he had any intellectual intercourse with the Vedantic teachings, but he seems to have traveled extensively; and to have gone from there north to Khurasan, Turkestan, and Turfan, traveling with trade caravans, and eventually back to Baghdad.

Upon his return to Baghdad, al-Hallaj resumed his teaching and preaching to the people on the life of prayer and intense love of God. He led an ascetic and holy life and was revered by many. But again, opposition rose up from the orthodox legalists of the city, and al-Hallaj left for two years to remain in Mecca. On his return, the religionists—in particular, one Muhammed ibn Da’ud—brought action against al-Hallaj’s “heretical” doctrines. Both the Shiites and the Sunnis rallied against him, and, in the year 912, he was arrested and imprisoned. Nearly ten years were to pass before the high judge of Arabia (now Iraq) could be prevailed upon to sign the order for his execution.

Mansur passed those years in prison in prayer and contemplation, sometimes writing of his ecstatic experiences of divine love, and expressing his knowledge of the oneness of God and the universe. Of his last days, the famous Turkish Sufi, Attar (d. 1220), later wrote:

When al-Hallaj was in prison, he was asked, “What is love?” He answered, “You will see it today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.” And that day they cut off his hands and feet, and the next day they put him on the gallows, and the third day, they gave his ashes to the wind...”²

On the day of his execution, March 26, 922, a great many of the people of Baghdad turned out to see his death; among them many of his old friends, teachers and disciples. It is told that he danced to the gallows, singing praise to God, as though he were going to a wedding festival. Some threw stones at him as he passed, but al-Hallaj had long foreseen and prepared for that day and was like a bridegroom going to meet his beloved. He had written, in his poetry, of the moth that, drawn to

the flame, and caring nothing for its light or its heat, desires only to be merged in that flame. "Happiness comes from God," he said, "but suffering is He Himself!" "Slay me, O my trustworthy friends!" he sang; "For in being slain is my life." And, as he approached his executioners, he remarked, "It is now time for the lover to make the One single."

It is reported that his death was long, and deliberately drawn out by his tormentors. First, he was beaten with scourges, and then his hands and feet were cut off; and he was left in that condition to bleed and suffer until the following day when he was hanged. Then, as if to rid themselves of his voice forever, his persecutors severed his head and burned his body, and dumped his ashes in the Tigris. Since that time, however, the name of al-Hallaj has become famous throughout the world, and his perfect love has been extolled in song over the centuries. One admirer, who had also known the experience of *ana'l Haqq*, wrote:

O my friends, you have wreaked your vengeance on al-Hallaj; but it is you who are the losers. What a gentle, perfect soul he was! "*Ana'l Haqq*," he said. Perhaps if you had listened, you too would have learned to put an end to that ignorance which prevents you from saying *ana'l Haqq*. Far better had you murdered your own sense of pride and selfhood which stands like a cloud between you and your *ana'l Haqq*. But you will live in sorrow and struggle and bitter pain, while al-Hallaj is spread throughout space in blissful joy, all pervading and sparkling with light. You tried to silence him, but his words are whispered even by the autumn winds. The lips of countless millions of sages praise him still. You cut off his head to wipe the smile from his face, but his bell-like laughter spreads from shore to shore, and his laughing eyes twinkle in the clear blue sky.³

Al-Hallaj's words of truth live still; in a modern-day drama on the life of al-Hallaj by the Egyptian, Abdu's-Sabur, a chorus sings:

We will go scatter in the plough furrows of the peasants what we have stored from his words. ...We will preserve them among the merchant's goods, and we will give them to the wind that wanders o'er the waves; We will hide them in the mouths of singing camel-drivers who traverse the desert; we will note them down on papers, to be kept in the folds of the frock; and we will

make them into verses and songs. Tell us—what would have become of his words had he not been martyred?⁴

Thus, al-Hallaj lives on, as has Jesus, in the hearts and minds of all true lovers of God; and his name is a banner of victory for all who would declare the saving truth to men.

NOTES:

1. Nicholson, R.A., *The Mystics Of Islam*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963; p. 151
2. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975; pp. 62-64
3. Anonymous
4. Schimmel, *op. cit.*; p. 77

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II. IBN ARABI

Islamic Sufism, in the 13th century, produced some of its most prized literature from the hands of some of its most revered saints; among them were: Attar (d. 1220), al-Farid (d. 1235), Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), Rumi (d.1273), and Iraqi (d. 1289). As we shall later see, it was an equally illustrious period in the Christian and Vedantic traditions; indeed, the 13th century saw one of the most saint-filled and spiritually glorious periods in the history of the world. In the Muslim tradition, with which we are now concerned, it was Ibn ‘Arabi who, through his philosophical writings based on his vision of Unity, set the tone for his time, and gave new life and understanding to the mysticism of the Sufis

Muhammed Ali Muhammed Ibn al ‘Arabi al-Ta’i al-Hatimi, better known simply as Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), was born into a Muslim family in Murcia, Spain, on August 7, 1165. He was given religious training by his father, and while he was still quite young, his father took him to meet the famed philosopher, Averroes, in Cordoba. It seems the aging Averroes had heard of young Arabi’s spiritual proclivities and had asked to meet him. During this youthful period in Spain, Ibn Arabi also came under the spiritual tutelage of two women, both elderly ladies well versed in mystical knowledge, to whom he became quite devoted. It is said

that the young man used to spend his free hours in the cemetery, where he practiced his meditation on God.

After his education in Seville, Ibn Arabi became married and obtained a position as secretary to the governor of Seville. He was twenty years of age when he was initiated into the Sufi path. It is not known when he became illumined by God's grace and realized the Unity of which he was later to write; but we know that between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty, he traveled several times to Tunis in North Africa, where he visited a number of Sufi *Shaikhs*, and spent much of his time in studying and writing.

In the year 1200, when he was thirty-five, Ibn Arabi was in Morocco, and had a vision telling him to journey to Fez, and then on to Egypt. He traveled through Alexandria and Cairo and finally made his way to the holy city of Mecca. During the period between 1200 and 1206, much of which was spent at Mecca, he wrote a great deal, including portions of his magnum opus, *Meccan Revelations*. And by the time he went to Cairo in 1206, his reputation as a divine had already preceded him. However, the orthodox *mullas* of Islam living there were highly offended by his teachings and were openly antagonistic to him.

In 1210, he traveled north, and arrived in the city of Konya in Anatolia. There he was welcomed as a great teacher of Sufism, and his influence spread rapidly. He continued to travel about, visiting with celebrated divines, such as Shaikh Suhrawardi (1145-1234) in Baghdad, and eventually settled in Damascus in 1223, where he stayed for the remainder of his life. Having married twice before, he now married a third time in Damascus, and fathered three children; but the children for which he is best remembered are the products of his pen. He wrote *Bezels Of Wisdom* around 1230; and is said to have once remarked that he had written over two hundred and fifty books during his lifetime.

When reading the books of Ibn Arabi, one cannot help wishing that he had presented his thought in a more simple and direct manner, without the many effusive embellishments of Quranic myth and imagery. As in the case of Philo, whose Jewry gets in the way of his expression and makes it all a muddle, so Ibn Arabi's Islamic heritage gets in the way; and one must tramp through a vast swamp of verbiage to find the occasional gems of clear mystical insight. What he had to say was said in so much more precise a manner by Shankara, in so much more direct a manner by Ashvagoshā and S'eng-hsin, so much more poetically by a great number of his own fellow Sufis, and with so much less verbiage by so many who have realized the Truth. But it is because he represents

an early attempt within the Islamic tradition to convey a rational formulation of the vision of Unity that he must be accounted one of the most influential thinkers of Sufism in any history of mystical thought.

We have already seen how the various seers of other traditions have described the experience of Unity in complementary terms, naming the Absolute and Its manifestory-Power by such terms as “Brahman- Maya”, “Purusha-Prakrti”, “Nirvana-Samsara”, “Theos-Logos”, and so on; the Sufis also had long framed their conception of the Reality in such complementary terms. Prior to Ibn Arabi, the martyred saint, Suhrawardi (1153-1191), who died in prison at the age of thirty-eight (not the Suhrawardi whom Ibn Arabi met in Baghdad), had written of the manifestation of the world from God in terms reminiscent of the Christian Fathers’ exposition of the Logos:

The Essence of the First, the absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby It is manifested and brings all things into existence, giving life to them by Its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the light of His Essence, and all beauty and perfection are the gifts of His bounty. To attain fully to this illumination is salvation. ¹

Ibn Arabi’s contribution to mystical philosophy was his clarification of this concept of complementarity, and his employment of two distinct terms to distinguish the unmanifest Absolute from the manifested world of phenomena; (borrowing from al-Hallaj,) he calls them *Haqq* and *Khalq*. When we experience the Absolute in the transcendent state of consciousness, says Ibn Arabi, we are experiencing *Haqq*; when we experience the world of multiple phenomena through our senses, we are experiencing *Khalq*. “But,” says Ibn Arabi, “the *Haqq* of whom transcendence is asserted is the same as the *Khalq* of whom immanence is asserted, although the one is distinguishable from the other.” ² Thus, Ibn Arabi’s vision and his doctrine, like that of the other great mystics of all religious traditions, was one of the essential unity of God and the universe.

For him, the world (*Khalq*) is simply the appearance of God (*Haqq*). It is simply our limited perspectives as individual perceiving entities that produces the appearance of multiplicity. “Multiplicity,” he says, is simply due to the existence of different points of view, not to an actual division in the one Essence.”³ And unity simply means that, “two or more things are *actually* identical but *conceptually* distinguishable the one from the other; so that, in one

sense the one is the other, while in another sense it is not.”⁴ “If you regard Him through Him, then He sees Himself through Himself; but if you regard Him through yourself, then the unity vanishes.”⁵ “[Furthermore,] if you assert that only *Haqq* is real, you limit God [to transcendence]. And if you assert that only *Khalq* is real, you deny Him [altogether]. But if you assert that *both* things are real, you follow the right course, and you are a leader and a master in gnosis.”⁶

Elsewhere, he says, in much the same vein:

Do not distinguish *Haqq*, lest you regard Him as separate from *Khalq*. Do not distinguish *Khalq*, lest you invest it with non-Reality. Know Him as both particularized and unparticularized, and be established in Truth. Be in a state of unity if you wish, or be in a state of separation if you wish; if the Totality reveals Itself to you, you will attain the crown of victory.⁷

In the following passage, Ibn Arabi describes how, when the mystical vision of unity dawns, it is seen that the One alone exists—and that It *is* the many:

When the mystery of the oneness of the soul and the Divine is revealed to you, you will understand that you are no other than God. ... Then you will see all your actions to be His actions and all your attributes to be His attributes and your essence to be His essence.

...Thus, instead of [your own] essence, there is the essence of God and in place of [your own] attributes, there are the attributes of God. He who knows himself sees his whole existence to be the Divine existence but does not experience that any change has taken place in his own nature or qualities. For when you know yourself, your sense of a limited identity vanishes, and you know that you and God are one and the same.⁸

...There is no existence save His existence. ...This means that the existence of the beggar is His existence and the existence of the sick is His existence. Now, when this is admitted, it is acknowledged that all existence is His existence; and that the existence of all created things, both accidents and substances, is His existence; and when the secret of one particle of the

atoms is clear, the secret of all created things, both outward and inward, is clear; and you do not see in this world or the next, anything except God. ⁹

This vision is universal among the seers. It must be admitted that Ibn Arabi, by the 13th century, had access to the writings of the seers of ancient Greece, the Neoplatonists, the Christian Fathers, perhaps even of the Vedantists and Buddhists, and certainly of his Sufi predecessors. However, we mustn't imagine on that account that he was merely recounting a learned philosophical position. He had "seen" It, and spoke from his own direct experience, framing his words in the idiom of his own time and traditional affiliations. "Such knowledge," he said,

can only be had by actual experience, nor can the reason of man define it, or arrive at any cognizance of it by deduction, just as one cannot, without experience, know the taste of honey, the bitterness of patience, the bliss of sexual union, love, passion, or desire. ¹⁰

In his writings, Ibn Arabi strove above all to explain the identity of God and the Self for the benefit of all who sought to comprehend the Truth. Here are a few of his most penetrating remarks on this theme:

Know that whenever something permeates another, it is assumed into the other. That which permeates, the agent, is disguised by that which is permeated, the object. In this case, the object is the manifest [universe], and the agent is the Unmanifest, the Hidden. ¹¹

On Him alone we depend for everything; our dependence on other things is in reality dependence on Him, for they are nothing but His appearances. ¹²

The eye perceives nothing but Him; only He is to be known. We are His; by Him we exist, and by Him we are governed; and we are, at all times and in all states, in His presence. ¹³

Nothing but the Reality is. There is no separate being, no arriving and no being far away. This is seen in true vision; when I experienced it, I saw nothing but Him.

When my Beloved appears, with what eye do I see Him? With His eye, not with mine; for no one sees Him except Himself. ¹⁴

It is none other than He who progresses or journeys as you. There is nothing to be known but He; and since He is Being itself, He is therefore also the journeyer. There is no knower but He; so, who are you? Know your true Reality. ... He is the essential Self of all. But He conceals it by [the appearance of] otherness, which is “you.” ¹⁵

If you hold to multiplicity, you are with the world; and if you hold to the Unity, you are with the Truth. ...Our names are but names for God; at the same time our individual selves are His shadow. He is at once our identity and not our identity... Consider! ¹⁶

In one sense the Reality is creatures; in another sense, It is not. ...Whether you assert that It is undivided or divided, the Self is alone. The manifold [universe] exists and yet it does not exist.¹⁷

Therefore, know your Self, who you are, what is your identity. ...Consider well in what way you are *Haqq*, and in what way *Khalq*, as being separate, other.¹⁸ He who knows himself knows his Lord; ...indeed, He is his very identity and reality. ¹⁹

As for the theorists and thinkers, and the scholastic theologians, with their talk about the soul and its properties, none of them have grasped the Reality; such speculation can never grasp it. He who seeks to know the Reality through theoretical speculation is flogging a dead horse; ... for he who seeks to know It by any means other than the one proper to It, will never grasp It. ²⁰

If men knew themselves, they would know God; and if they really knew God, they would be satisfied with Him and would think of Him alone. ²¹

NOTES:

1. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions Of Islam*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1975; p. 261
2. Affifi, A.E., *The Mystical Philosophy Of Muhyic Din-ibnul ‘Arabi*,

- Cambridge, AMS Press, 1939; p. 21
3. *Ibid.*; p. 11
 4. *Ibid.*; p. 11
 5. *Ibid.*; pp. 10-11
 6. *Ibid.*; p. 21
 7. Austin, R.W.J. (trans.), *Ibn Al-Arabi: The Bezels Of Wisdom*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1980/1980; p.125
 8. Landau, Rom, *The Philosophy Of Ibn Arabi*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1959; pp. 83-84
 9. *Ibid.*; p. 83
 10. Ibn Arabi, *Meccan Revelations*, I
 11. Austin, *op. cit.*; p. 92
 12. *Ibid.*; p. 98
 13. *Ibid.*; p. 137
 14. *Ibid.*; p. 108
 15. *Ibid.*; p. 136
 16. *Ibid.*; pp. 126-127
 17. *Ibid.*; p. 88
 18. *Ibid.*; p. 126
 19. *Ibid.*; p. 153
 20. *Ibid.*; p. 153
 21. Landau, *op. cit.*; p. 79

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III. IRAQI

A younger contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabi, the celebrated Sufi poet, Fakhruddin Iraqi (1213-1289), was born in the village of Kamajan, in Persia (present day Iran). According to legend, he was famous in his region for his religious devotion by the time he was eight years old; and by the age of seventeen he was giving lectures on the scriptures to his schoolmates. As the story goes, he was drawn to the Sufi path when a group of wandering dervishes passed through the town, and he happened to hear their plaintive songs of divine love. Iraqi immediately left his studies behind, and went off with the Sufi band, wandering throughout Persia and into India.

In the city of Multan, in India, he met the Shaikh, Baha’ud-din, of the Suhrawardiyya Order, and became his disciple. Not long thereafter, he married

the Shaikh's daughter, by whom he had a son, Kabiruddin. For twenty-five years Iraqi lived in Multan under the munificent protection and guidance of his master, Baha'uddin. Iraqi was, by nature, a poet; and during his years at Multan he wrote a number of devotional songs; but his great masterpiece of poetry, the *Lama'at*, or "Glimpses," which has brought him everlasting fame, was written some years later, in Anatolia (Turkey).

In 1268, when Iraqi was fifty-five, his old master, Baha'ud-din, died, and passed the succession of the Order to him. However, there was much discontent and turmoil over this change of leadership, not only within the Order, but among the political factions of the area as well; and Iraqi decided it would be best to leave Multan. So, along with a few loyal friends, he journeyed by sea to Oman, on the coast of Arabia. There, he was received as a celebrity, and was soon made the chief Shaikh of the district. But Iraqi was not content to remain in Oman; instead, he set out for Mecca, and from there to Damascus, and onward north to Anatolia, to the city of Konya.

Konya was the city in which Ibn Arabi had spent some years of his life, and where Sadruddin Qunawi (d. 1274), Ibn Arabi's chief disciple, now lived. It was also the home of the famous Sufi, Jalal-uddin Rumi, about whom we shall hear more later. Iraqi quickly became the intimate friend of both of these revered Sufis, but most especially of Qunawi, who had a great influence on him intellectually. Qunawi, as mentioned, was the principal disciple of Ibn Arabi in this area; and he was also very actively engaged in the dissemination of Ibn Arabi's teachings, attempting to popularize the philosophy of unity taught him by his master. It was this philosophy, which was to become the foundation and rationale of Iraqi's most exquisite poetry, the loom upon which he would weave a tapestry of unparalleled beauty.

Ibn Arabi had been not only the teacher of Qunawi but had also become his step-father by marrying Qunawi's widowed mother; in addition, Ibn Arabi had bestowed on Qunawi the successorship of his lineage, and Qunawi was now the chief Shaikh of the city of Konya. He gave frequent lectures and wrote books explaining the mystical and metaphysical precepts of Ibn Arabi, and had a number of gifted, and later distinguished, disciples himself. His lectures on Ibn Arabi's *Bezels Of Wisdom* and *Meccan Revelations* were attended by Iraqi, who became thoroughly fascinated and inspired by the study of these works. Each day, after the lectures of Qunawi, he would, in a state of inspired joy, set down a few verses of his own, illustrating Ibn Arabi's teachings, and at last collected

them in a book, which he called *Lama'at*, which may be translated as “Flashes,” or “Glimpses” of insight.

When he showed his little book to Qunawi, the great Shaikh, after reading it, pressed it reverently to his eyes, and exclaimed, “Iraqi, you have captured the secret essence of Ibn Arabi’s thought; your *Lama'at* is the very heart of his words!” Ibn Arabi, though a true mystic, had been of a metaphysical turn of mind; he labored at great length to thoroughly explain the mystery of things. Iraqi, however, was a poet; he was able to express the thought of Ibn Arabi in exquisitely succinct gems of precision. He used the simple language of love to capture the essential truth of the complementarity of *Haqq* and *Khalq*, which Ibn Arabi had so elaborately articulated; and turned the intellectual abstractions of Ibn Arabi into immediately perceived fruits-in-the-hand. Where Ibn Arabi had hovered like a bee over the blossom of Truth, examining its fragrance, Iraqi settled in the flower’s heart, and drank its nectar.

Destiny, it seems, had brought Iraqi to Konya, where he was to catch his “Glimpses” of the one Reality; but he was not to remain there for long. He had found favor with one of the local rulers, the Amir, Parwanah, who built for him a retreat in the town of Tokat, and so Iraqi lived and taught there for some years. But when Parwanah was suspected by the Mongol Emperor, Abaka, of consorting with his enemies, the Amir was executed, and Iraqi fled Tokat in fear for his life.

Arriving in Cairo, Iraqi met with the Sultan there, who became very favorably impressed with him and made him the chief Shaikh of Cairo, conferring on him exceptional honors. And when, after some time, he traveled to Damascus, he was treated in a similarly reverential manner there. But he was now old, and after about a year in Damascus, he became quite ill, and sent for his son, Kabir-uddin, who had remained in Multan. With his son at his side, he died at the age of seventy-eight, in the year 1289.

Here are a few selected verses and passages from his celebrated *Lama'at*:

Beloved, I sought You here and there,
 Asked for news of You from all I met.
 Then I saw You through myself,
 And found we were identical.
 Now I blush to think I ever searched
 For signs of You. ¹

By day I praised You, but never knew it;
 By night I slept with You without realizing it,
 Fancying myself to be myself;
 But no, I was You and never knew it. ²

“O You who are so unbearably beautiful,
 Whose beloved are You?” I asked.
 “My own,” He replied.
 “For I am one and one alone—
 Love, lover, beloved, mirror, beauty, eye!” ³

I sought solitude with my loved one,
 Yet find there is no one here but myself.
 And if there were a “someone else,”
 then, truly, I should not have attained her. ⁴

When I clutched at His skirt,
 I found His hand in my sleeve. ⁵

I am the one I love; He whom I love is I.
 Two, yet residing in a single body. ⁶

If I have become the Beloved,
 Who is the lover?
 Beloved, Love and lover—three in one.
 There is no place for union here,
 So, what is this talk of “separation?” ⁷

What He takes,
 He takes with His own hand from
 Himself; What He gives,
 He gives from Himself to Himself. ⁸

Hunter, prey, bait, and trap.
 Candle, candlestick, flame, and moth.
 Beloved, lover, soul, and soul’s desire.
 Inebriation, drinker, wine, and cup—
 All is He! ⁹

Is it You or I—this reality in the eye?
 Beware, beware of the word, “two.” ¹⁰

“I” and “You” have made of man a duality.
 Without these words,
 You are I and I am You. ¹¹

He speaks; He
 listens.
 “You” and “I” are but a pretense. ¹²

When shall You and I divorce ourselves,
 So that “You” and “I” are gone,
 And only God remains? ¹³

If You are everything,
 Then, who are all these people?
 And if I am nothing,
 What’s all this noise about?
 You are the Totality; Everything is You. Agreed!
 Then, all that is “other-than-You”—
 What is it?
 Oh, indeed I know, nothing exists but You!
 But, tell me, whence all this confusion? ¹⁴

He Himself speaks of Truth.
 He Himself listens.
 He Himself shows Himself.
 He Himself sees. ¹⁵

The world but seems to be,
 Yet it is only a blending of light and shade.
 Discern the meaning of this dream.
 Discriminate between time and Eternity.
 All is nothing, nothing.
 All is He. All is He. ¹⁶

Listen, riffraff: Do you want to be ALL?
 Then go, go and become nothing. ¹⁷

You are nothing when you wed the One.
 But, when you truly become nothing,
 You are everything. ¹⁸

Regard yourself as a cloud drifting before your Sun.

Detach yourself from the senses,
 And behold your intimacy with the Sun. ¹⁹
 If you lose yourself on this path,
 Then, you will know for sure:
 He is you, and you are He. ²⁰

NOTES:

1. Chittock, W.C. & Wilson, Peter L. (trans.), *Fakhruddin Iraqi: Divine Flashes*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1982; p. 120.
2. *Ibid.*; p. 124
3. *Ibid.*; p. 111
4. *Ibid.*; p. 95
5. *Ibid.*; p. 117
6. *Ibid.*; p. 125
7. *Ibid.*; p. 76
8. *Ibid.*; p. 96
9. *Ibid.*; p. 110
10. *Ibid.*; p. 77
11. *Ibid.*; p. 103
12. *Ibid.*; p. 80
13. *Ibid.*; p. 127
14. *Ibid.*; p. 99
15. *Ibid.*; p. 80
16. *Ibid.*; p. 119
17. *Ibid.*; p. 10
18. *Ibid.*; p. 112
19. *Ibid.*; p. 123
20. *Ibid.*; p. 120

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IV. RUMI

Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) was born in the city of Balkh, in Persia. His father took his family and fled Balkh in 1219, when the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan threatened the city. Jalaluddin's father, Baha'uddin, was a theologian and mystic, and it was he who molded the sensibilities of the young Rumi. It is said that, while the family was yet wandering through Persia, Baha'uddin took his son to meet the famous poet, Attar (d. 1230), who gave his blessings to Jalaluddin.

After long journeying, the family reached Anatolia, then under the rule of the Seljukid Turks, where they were relatively free of the Mongol threat. For a while, the family lived in Laranda (modern Karaman), where Jalaluddin was married and had a son at the age of nineteen. The father was called to a post in Konya in 1228, and took Jalaluddin along, his mother having passed away a few years earlier. Baha'uddin died a few years after they had settled in Konya, and Jalaluddin assumed his father's position as religious teacher to a small community of devotees there.

Jalaluddin studied the mystical writings of the earlier Sufi poets, like Sana'i (d. ca. 1131) and Attar, to whom he was later to acknowledge his debt, saying "Sana'i was the spirit, and Attar his two eyes; we have come after Sana'i and Attar." He was also taught and influenced by a friend and disciple of his father, Burhanuddin Mahaqqiq. But Rumi's unique soul, vision, and talent were his own. His latent mysticism and poetic exuberance were watered into full bloom by his meeting with a love-intoxicated dervish by the name of Shamsuddin [of] Tabriz.

In 1244, Jalaluddin met Shams Tabriz in the streets of Konya, and was drawn by him to the fervent life of mystical love. His relation to Tabriz was like that of a loving disciple to his Guru or Pir. Jalaluddin transferred all his ardent devotion to Shams, as only a spiritual lover can do, seeing him as the Divine manifest in his life for the sake of providing him with companionship with God. However, Rumi's sons and other family members were so jealous and outraged by the hold that Shams had on Jalaluddin's affections that they murdered Shams and threw his body in a well. At least, so the story goes. Rumi filled the void in his life by writing a book of poems of love and longing, called *Divani-Shams Tabriz*, sometimes addressing them to Shams, and sometimes identifying with him.

His verses are full of the imagery of love, but it is the love of the soul for God. Rumi is the epitome of the mystical lover; but he also knew the “union” with his Beloved and speaks with rare beauty of this mysterious “marriage” of the soul and God. In his great masterpiece, the *Mathnawi*, which consists of twenty-six thousand verses in the Persian language; he garbs his painful love longing in colorful tales whose characters range from animals to legendary folk-heroes. In a rhapsody of ecstatic poetry, he tells the secrets of the mystic’s heart in a thousand imaginative ways. Rumi was a natural poet; his thoughts poured out in a most amazingly varied and exuberant flood of imagery and poetic melody. For sheer effusiveness and breathtaking profundity, there has never been another like him.

The city of Konya was a gathering place for mystics, artists and intellectuals from all over the Muslim world; and Rumi lived there, famous in his own day as a spiritual Master and teacher, drawing Sufis from all over, who traveled to Konya just to meet him. After his death in 1273, Rumi quickly became recognized throughout Islam as the *Maulana*, “the Master”; and his *Mathnawi* has since been hailed as “the Persian Quran.” Today the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, who trace their lineage to him, sing and dance to his songs; and the very name of “Rumi” brings tears of love to the eyes of all true lovers of God throughout the world.

Here are just a few selections from his voluminous writings:

When I speak of adepts, He is the Master.
 When I peer into my heart, He is the Beloved.
 When I look for peace, He is the Pacifier; when I
 enter the battlefield, He is my Sword.
 When I come to the celebration, He is the wine and
 the sweetmeats.
 When I enter the rose-garden, He is the Beauty.
 When I descend into the mine, He is the Diamond and the
 Ruby.
 When I dive into the ocean, He is the Pearl.
 When I wander in the desert, He is the Flower growing there.
 When I ascend into the heavens, He is the Star.

When I climb the mountain, He is the Summit.
 When I burn in sorrow, He is the Flame.
 When I ready myself for warfare, He is my
 Commander and my General.

When I rejoice at feast-time, He is the cup Bearer, the
 Musician, and the Cup.
 When I write to my Beloved,
 He is the Ink, the ink Well and the Paper.
 When I awaken, He is my awakensess.
 When I sleep, He is my Dream.
 When I search for words to my songs,
 He gives rhymes to my memory.
 Whatever image you may paint in the mind,
 He is the Painter, and He is the Brush.
 If you seek a "greater," He is Greater than greater.
 Leave off language and books; let Him be your Book.
 Be silent, for on every side is His Light.
 And even though you pass beyond all boundaries,
 He, the Judge, is there. ¹

Whatever I say in exposition and explanation of love,
 When I come to love I am ashamed of that explanation.
 The speech of the tongue may elucidate,
 But speechless love is yet more clear.
 The pen hastily writes, but when it comes to love, it shatters in two.
 When the intellect tries to explain love, it becomes helplessly stuck,
 like an ass in the mud.
 It is love alone that can give proper expression to love:
 The proof of the Sun is the Sun itself; if you seek proof, then do not
 avert your face from Him.
 Those loves which are for appearance only are not
 love -- they are a disgrace!
 Such shows of love must be abandoned.
 In its place, real love must grow.
 All that is other than the true "I" must be slain. ²

I complain of the Soul of the soul, but in truth I am not complaining; I
 am only relating.
 My heart is saying, "I am tormented by Him," and I am all the while
 laughing at its poor pretense.
 Be just with me, O Glory of righteousness.
 O Thou who art the Throne and I the threshold of Thy door!
 Where, in truth, are the threshold and the Throne?
 In that place where the Beloved is, where are "we" and "I"?

O Thou Soul who art free of “we” and “I,”
 O Thou who art the subtle Essence of the souls of men and women,
 When a man or woman unites with Thee, Thou art that One.
 when their individuality is obliterated, Thou alone art.
 Thou didst contrive this “I” and this “we” only so that Thou mightest
 play the game of worship with Thyself,
 So that all “I’s” and “Thou’s” should become one Soul, immersed at
 last in the one Beloved. ³

It happened that we made a journey without “we.”
 There our heart blossomed without “we.”
 That Full-Moon which was hiding from us Put Its Face to our face
 without “we.”
 Without dying in grief for the Beloved,
 We were reborn in His grief, without “we.”
 We are always intoxicated without wine.
 We are always happy without “we.”
 Don’t remember us as “we.”
 We are our own remembrance, without “we.”
 We are happy together, proclaiming
 “Oh, we shall always be without “we.”
 All doors were closed to us.
 And then the path of Truth
 Opened without “we.”
 ...We have passed beyond right and wrong,
 Beyond both prayer and the sins of existence, without “we.” ⁴

...The universe was not there; only I was.
 Adam wasn’t there; only I was.
 That light of unity was “I.”
 I am the Everlasting, and I am the prophet Elias.
 The universe gets its light from me.
 Adam took his form from me.
 I am the All-Wise, the Knower, the Judge of all judges. ⁵

Here, listen to my boast: every moment
 I say that I am the water, and not the jar [containing it].
 I am not the ocean [of phenomenal existence], neither am I
 not the ocean.

I am the leaf of every breeze-filled tree.
 I am the wetness of the water in the stream.
 Don't laugh like children!
 You do not understand my state.
 Read a chapter from me, unfold a secret from her
 [the Creative Force],
 I am drunk of that wine forbidden by the lawgivers.
 I am drunk of the wine of oneness; I am free of
 color and smell.
 I am oblivious to this place; my mind is elsewhere.
 I don't know vinegar from sugar; I don't know a
 vat from a jar [i.e., he sees only God everywhere].⁶

If there is any lover in the world, O Muslim, it is I.
 If there is any believer, infidel, or Christian hermit,
 it is I. The wine, the cup bearer, the musician, the
 instrument and the music,
 The beloved, the candle, the liquor and the inebriation, it is I.
 The seventy-two religious sects in the world
 Do not really exist; I swear by God every religious
 sect—it is I.
 Earth, air, water and fire: do you know what they are? Earth,
 air, water and fire—and the soul as well; it is I.
 Truth and falsehood, good and evil, pleasure and suffering,
 beginning and end,
 Knowledge, learning, asceticism, devotion and faith—it is I.
 Be assured that the fire of hell and its flames,
 Paradise, Eden and the angels of heaven—it is I.
 Heaven and earth and all they hold: angels, demons, and
 men— it is I. ⁷

NOTES:

1. Nicholson, R.A., *Divan-i-Shams Tabriz: Selected Poems of Jalaluddin Rumi*, Cambridge, 1998.
2. Winfield, E.H., *The Masnavi*, London, 1898.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Nicholson, *Divan-i-Shams; op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*
7. *Mathnawi; op. cit.*

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