



GOODNESS AND HUMAN ACTION

To Do His Will, to Conform to the Divine Norm

As for him who has faith and does wholesome works, his recompense shall be the most beautiful.
Quran 18:88

Thou didst not throw when thou threwest; rather it was God Who threw.
Quran 8:17

Actions are judged according to their intentions.
Hadīth

Wine in ferment is a beggar suing for our ferment;
Heaven in revolution is a beggar suing for our consciousness.
Wine was intoxicated with us, not we with it;
The body came into being from us, not we from it.
We are as bees and bodies as the honeycomb:
We have made the body, cell by cell, like wax.¹
Rūmī, Mathnawī

There are two main gates to the Garden of Truth: knowledge and love, although of course God's Mercy knows no bounds and its exact operation within the human order is beyond our ken. Putting aside the exceptional cases of those drawn into the Garden through special Divine Mercy, the gates remain those of knowledge and love. The roads leading to these gates, however, are paved with human action. To exist as a human being is to act, and how we act in this life—whether we perform good or evil actions—affects our soul and its ability to love and know God. Therefore, no spiritual path can neglect the plane of action, and Sufism is no exception. Those who reside in the Garden of Truth know and love God, but they have also lived with virtue and acted in goodness, which is of course a basic quality whose effects are not limited to the plane of action. Had it not been so, action would not be relevant. Goodness in action is therefore an essential component of the perfection we seek and complements the attributes of beauty, love, and knowledge of the Truth identified with those who reside in the Garden of Truth, and identified as well with that Garden and of course ultimately with the Gardener.

The Hindus speak of the three yogas of action, love, and knowledge, or the yogas of *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna*, as discussed in the Bhagavad Gita, of which only the last two can lead to eternal salvation and release from the bondage of limitation. Likewise, Sufis speak of the fear of God, *al-makhāfah*; love of Him, *al-maḥabbah*; and knowledge of Him, *al-ma'rifah*. There is, however, a difference between Hindu and Islamic eschatological doctrines on this issue. In Islam once one reaches Paradise, even if it be based on virtuous actions rooted in faith and not knowledge and love of God, one does not fall from the paradisaical state, as is the case in Hinduism, where if one follows only the path of action or *karma yoga*, once one's good karma is exhausted in the next world, one falls again into the realm of the lower levels of *māyā* associated with cycles of birth and death. In any case, to fear God, in contrast to His creatures, is to love Him and move toward Him, and to love Him is to know Him as far as the Sufi perspective is concerned. That is why a *ḥadīth* states, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God," echoing the famous dictum of the apostle Paul. Fear of God deals with the level of action and turns the will of the adept away from evil acts, which have a negative effect upon the soul, and toward goodness and virtue.

GOOD AND EVIL ACTS

In the second chapter, on truth, we discussed the metaphysical doctrine of the reality of evil, which states that evil is the result of separation from the Divine Principle, which alone is absolute goodness, and that separation is the cause of what appears on the human plane as evil. Some Sufis, who have fixed their gaze upon the All-Good or the absolute goodness of God, have in fact denied the reality of evil. But, as already mentioned, on the plane of relativity in which we live, evil is real; it is as real as we are in our relative level of existence. It would in fact be a catastrophe for the soul on the road to the Garden of Truth to deny the evil forces within as well as without until it has transcended completely the realm of duality and opposition, until it has reached that absolute Goodness from whence one can deny the reality of evil because one has now gone beyond the domain of relativity, where evil exists.

As Rūmī, who composed so many verses concerning good and evil, said, "There is no absolute evil in the world; evil is relative. Recognize this fact."² We can have both a contemplative and an active life. We can contemplate the Supreme Good beyond all evil, but when we act in the world and confine ourselves to the external world of action, which in fact constitutes most of our ordinary life, we face the reality of good and evil, appearing to us as absolutes and irreducible opposites. For example, if we act to save a human life, that is considered an act of goodness, whereas if we act to kill or destroy human life, that is seen as evil, and the two types of action stand opposed to each other. It is this opposition between good and evil that is the basis of morality.

The soul has several faculties and dimensions. In the realms of knowledge and love the dichotomy of good and evil can be transcended. But in the part of our soul that is attached to and concerned with the world of action, good and evil remain as irreducible opposites and absolute on their own level. That is why religious scholars and even some of those opposed to religious ethics speak of moral absolutes. While the Sufis understand the claims of morality to absoluteness on this level, they seek to go beyond the realm of external action altogether and through love and knowledge of the Divine reach absolute Goodness, which transcends the opposition of good and evil and sees the relativity of what we call evil in relation to the absolutely Good and

the absolutely Real. That is wherein Sufi ethics, which is a spiritualized ethics, differs from ordinary religious morality, while at the same time the Sufis attach great importance to morality on its own level.

Contemplatives in general, whether Sufi or otherwise, realize the relativity of all that is relative, including evil, and see evil as the absence of good. Without denying evil on its own level, they seek to transcend duality altogether through knowledge and love. Yet they remember that although they are transcending the duality of good and evil, they are not negating the significance of morality on its own level as they reach a reality even while they are in the relative domain that is in itself the All-Good. There is simply no ontological equivalence between good and evil. The latter is like a shadow of the former, which is a form of existence possessing reality. The problem is that for those caught in the shadows of earthly existence, the shadows are as real as themselves, and therefore they can hardly discern the shadow for what it is. The only hope of such people is to act according to the good, that is, to perform correct and virtuous actions in order to be able to leave the world of darkness for that of light and the relative for the Absolute. They can of course also turn to the paths of knowledge and love, but these paths also require good rather than evil action on the part of those who would aspire to follow them.

THE RELATION OF ACTION TO THE SOUL

God wants not our actions but our soul, but He judges our actions precisely because they affect our soul. There seems to be, from the external point of view, a vicious circle. The state of our soul determines what kind of action we perform, and our acts affect the state of our soul. Both of these assertions are true, but there is no vicious circle involved because we are beings with consciousness and the twin faculties of intelligence and will. Moreover, we possess a will that is free. Otherwise, the moral bearing of our actions would be meaningless. We must therefore begin where we are with our consciousness and then through discernment, which is a function of the intelligence, and the aid of revelation distinguish between good and evil and through our free will do that which is good, being always aware that how we act in turn affects the state of our soul.

As the Prophetic saying stated at the beginning of this chapter asserts, God judges our actions by our intentions. If the soul intends to

do good but the action it undertakes results in what from the immediate human point of view appears as evil, then God judges the soul not according to the consequent evil but according to the original good intention. The judgment by God of human actions on the Day of Judgment, according to Islam, Christianity, and other religions, is therefore not opposed to the fact that our souls belong to God and it is our souls that He wants. Every evil act creates a blemish upon the soul, and every good act helps to purify and perfect the soul and is essential to the cultivation of the virtues, to which we shall turn in the next chapter.

We are beings who know, love, and act, and there is an interplay between our being and our knowing, loving, and acting. Ontologically our being comes before everything else, but existentially our knowing, loving, and acting are the realities that fill the moments of our lives and of which we are aware. Our soul knows, loves, and acts—the latter primarily through the body. Moreover, knowing and loving both affect our actions and are often expressed through them. Furthermore, all three affect our mode of being while our mode of being and level of consciousness determine what we know and can know, what we love and can love, and how we act.

Although there is no way to enter into intimacy with God save through knowledge and love—which also require faith—action remains, therefore, of the greatest importance on the path to the Garden, action not in itself but in how it affects the soul and how it reflects its intentions, both hidden and manifest. To know God is to love Him, and to love Him is to surrender our will to Him. Now, surrender is already a form of action. Furthermore, from the point of view of spiritual realization, one must begin with surrender to the Divine Will, or *islām*, which involves the plane of action and which also includes the fear of God, hence abstention from evil acts. This total surrender combined with abstention from that which separates us from God and is displeasing to Him leads to loving Him, and that love leads those with the necessary contemplative qualities to the knowledge of God.

Correct human action requires, furthermore, for fallen humanity, whose innate intelligence is no longer functioning as God created it, the presence of revelation and faith in that revelation. Human intelligence has become too deeply hidden in the hearts of almost all of us to be able to discern by itself between truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, and good and evil. It needs the help of the objective manifestation

of the Divine Intellect or Logos/Word. This manifestation we call revelation, including its formal dimension concerned with religious rites and ethics. Furthermore, the will, which is free to accept or reject revelation, is called upon to attach itself to this theophany of the Sacred. That is what is called faith (*al-īmān*). It is faith that creates the dynamic within the soul to follow divine commands and to abstain from what the revealed sources consider to be evil. This *īmān* in turn leads to *iḥ-sān*, the virtue and beauty that must be attained in order to enter the Garden of Truth. That is why mystics in different religious climates have clung to the ethical teachings of their religion and its formal rites even while journeying in the illimitable sky of the Formless.

A great deal of debate has taken place in Christianity about whether it is faith or works that are the means of salvation. In Islam in general, and Sufism in particular, both have been emphasized. Faith is necessary for salvation, but faith must also lead to deeds acceptable in the eyes of God as determined by the Divine Law (*al-Sharī'ah*). All true Sufis begin with the *Sharī'ah*, which belongs primarily to the plane of action, and no matter how far they travel upon the path they remain faithful to its teachings. As long as we remain as human beings here on earth, we must perform acts of one kind or another. We can, therefore, never transcend the Divine Law. We can go beyond the legal teachings, which concern correct human action, only by transcending the level of action altogether through love and knowledge of the Divine.

Actions continue to have an effect upon the human soul as long as we are able to act according to our free will. At the moment of death our hands become cut off from acting in the world and our souls return to God, but they take with them the effects that our actions have made upon them. That is why human actions have a significance beyond this world. This includes both good and evil acts, for both leave an imprint upon our immortal souls. That is why also the road to the Garden is paved by our actions while the gates to the Garden are those of love and knowledge. Furthermore, those who, in contrast to the Sufis, remain bound to the realm of action in this world without reaching the realities of Divine Love and Knowledge but who have lived in goodness and performed virtuous acts will follow the path to the Garden of Truth in the next life, as Sufis seek to do here and now.

THE FRUITS OF ACTION AND DETACHMENT: SINCERITY IN ACTION AND CHIVALRY

All actions bear fruit of one kind or another whether we are aware of those fruits or not. To every action there is a reaction, and this principle is not only a law of classical physics but also holds true morally and cosmically. That is what the traditions that came from India call the law of karma. Our good acts bear positive fruit even if not immediately, and our evil acts have negative consequences that boomerang upon us sooner or later. The great moralist Persian poet who lived in the thirteenth century, after whom Ralph Waldo Emerson named one of his most famous poems, that is, Sa'dī, said:

Do a goodly act and cast it into the Tigris River,
For God will recompense thee in the desert.

The spiritual person who seeks the Garden, however, performs an act of goodness not for the sake of recompense but because of goodness itself, leaving the rest in the Hands of God. To be able to have the correct spiritual attitude toward action, one must become detached from the fruits of action. Detachment is a cardinal virtue required before one advances on the path. One must act for the sake of the Truth and in total detachment from the fruits of the act. This is of course much more easily said than done. There is a famous story in the *Mathnawī* of Rūmī that epitomizes the correct spiritual attitude toward selfless and detached action. It begins with the verse:

Learn from 'Alī sincerity in action,
Know that the Lion of God is untainted by blemish.³

In a battle 'Alī confronted a powerful enemy and after a fierce fight was able to throw the enemy to the ground and sit on his chest with his sword drawn. At this moment the enemy warrior spat in 'Alī's face, whereupon 'Alī immediately disengaged himself and abstained from delivering a blow with his sword. The enemy warrior, who was an idol worshipper, had never seen such an event. He became agitated and asked 'Alī why he had not killed him. The response of 'Alī, which in

the verses of the *Mathnawī* constitutes one of the masterpieces of Sufi poetry, was that ‘Alī was fighting at first for the preservation of the Truth, but once the enemy warrior spat in his face ‘Alī became angry, and he would never react on the basis of anger and certainly not get into a battle or slay someone for personal or selfish reasons. In Rūmī’s words, ‘Alī responded:

Said he, “I wield the sword for the sake of the Truth,
I am the servant of the Truth not the functionary of the body.
I am the lion of the Truth, not the lion of passions,
My action does witness bear to my religion.”

‘Alī is said to have been the founder of spiritual chivalry (*futuwwah* in Arabic and *jawānmardī* in Persian), and this story bears witness to what constitutes the very essence of chivalry, namely, sincere and detached action devoted to a noble cause. Chivalry combines action with selflessness, actions devoid of worldly motifs or tainted by vices such as anger, covetousness, lust for power, or thirst for revenge. It is far from accidental that in Islam orders of chivalry became integrated into certain schools of Sufism and that within the Sufi tradition it is expected that those who aspire to march upon the path to the Garden of Truth possess the virtue of chivalry.

There is much talk of *jihād* today, both in the West and among certain Muslim extremists, most of whom are unaware of their own tradition. The word *jihād* means not war but exertion in the path of God. And then there is, according to a well-known saying of the Prophet, the inner or greater *jihād*, which is the constant battle of the followers of the spiritual path to correct the imperfections of their soul and make it worthy of inhabiting the Garden. This is the highest form of inner action. There is also the lesser *jihād*, which can include war to defend oneself, one’s family, one’s nation, and one’s religion. From the spiritual point of view, however, even this kind of *jihād* must be selfless, detached, and not caused by anger or hatred. The fact that this story about ‘Alī takes place on a battlefield, as does the great Hindu classic the Bhagavad Gita, demonstrates that selfless and detached action must extend to even that most trying and violent form of human action that is war.

Detachment from the fruits of one’s actions is not unrelated to the Chinese doctrine of *wu-wei*, that is, to act without acting. Our ordinary

actions plunge our souls into the cosmic chain of actions and reactions, or the chain of karma, as the Hindus would say. But that is because of our attachment to the fruits of our actions and the loss of the contemplative spirit, which reduces the soul to a substance that identifies itself solely with acts rather than with being, with preference for action over contemplation. But to act without acting requires also that one die before dying, as asserted in the famous Prophetic tradition, "Die before you die." It means to detach our will from our passions and impetus toward external actions and surrender it to God. The sage acts without acting like a lamp that illuminates its surroundings by simply existing. The sage contemplates and lives in the dimension of inwardness and by virtue of that interiority has a *sympatheia* with the inner reality of other beings and then acts upon them in the deepest sense without external action. The sage demonstrates in his or her reality the precedence of being over all external accidents and the priority of contemplation over action. But the sage nevertheless does act, and his or her acts are selfless, detached, and based upon sincerity, goodness, compassion, and truthfulness.

THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL COURTESY (*ADAB*)

A term often used by Sufis is found also in most of the major languages of the Islamic peoples. It is *adab*, which means at once comportment, courtesy, culture, refined speech, literature, correct ethical attitudes, and many other concepts. It is really untranslatable and perhaps should be used in English in its Arabic form like terms such as *karma* and *guru*, which have entered English recently from Sanskrit, or *jihād* from Arabic. All traditional societies have tried to inculcate their own forms of *adab* within members of society from childhood, and Islamic civilization is no exception. For traditional Muslims, *adab* encompasses nearly all aspects of life from greeting people to eating to sitting in a gathering to entering a place of worship. As for quintessential *adab*, it has always been associated by Sufis with the actions and words of the Prophet himself. *Adab* is the means of controlling the passions, which affect and often originate human actions. It is also a way of formalizing human actions in such a way that they display harmony and beauty rather than disorderliness and ugliness. *Adab* even disciplines the body and brings out its innate dignity and its theomorphic nature and teaches us how

to carry ourselves in a manner that is worthy of the human state. Its goal is to control the ego and the passions and to inculcate the virtues of humility and charity within the human soul as well as bring out the majestic aspect of our existence. It is therefore closely related to spiritual discipline and is of great value in performing acts of goodness. It teaches us to discipline ourselves and to prepare the soul for that supreme sacrifice of its will and being before the altar of the Absolute, which is also Truth, Beauty, Love, and Goodness, qualities that are reflected in one way or another in the quintessential *adab* of traditional Islam beyond all cultural and ethnic idiosyncrasies. No one on the path to the Garden can be devoid of inward *adab*.

TO ACT WITH TRUTH—
TO ACT WITH LOVE AND COMPASSION:
THE SPIRITUAL EFFICACY OF ACTION

Of course not all actions possess spiritual efficacy although every action leaves its effect upon the soul in one way or another. The most efficacious of all actions from the spiritual point of view is of course prayer, to which we shall turn shortly. But first of all we must deal with the relation between action and truth as well as action and love combined with compassion. Action does not produce truth; that is the function of knowledge. But action based on truth can lead to the concrete realization of the truth. In this sense should the famous Arabic proverb, "Knowledge without action is like a tree without fruit," quoted in so many Sufi texts, be understood. First of all, correct action, if it is to be spiritually efficacious, has to be based on truth and not falsehood. Many a person has performed actions that have resulted in catastrophic results even if the actor did not have such consequences in mind. The reason is that such actions have been based on falsehood and ignorance. Most of the tragedies of the modern world are based on some level not on the truth but on falsehood and belong to this category. They are actions based on ignorance of the real nature of humanity, the world, and the Divine Principle.

Knowledge of the truth is in turn related to action, albeit in an indirect manner. The veils covering the soul prevent it from seeing the truth, and these veils act as obstacles for our intelligence and prevent it from reaching the truth. Correct action, rooted in the good and the true, has the effect of removing these veils and allowing us to know

the truth in more than an abstract manner. In this way knowledge is related to action in the process of realizing the truth as, conversely, correct action must be based on the truth. Action does not in itself produce knowledge, but within human beings and on the path to the Garden they are in a sense inseparable until one reaches the Abode of the One beyond the realm of all action and discursive thought based on the duality of subject and object. Furthermore, it is our actions that prove whether our knowledge of the Truth has been only theoretical or has become deeply rooted in our soul. Action based on truthfulness, especially such actions as prayer, charity, sacrifice, and truthful speech, help the knowledge of the Truth to become actualized in the soul. At all moments of human life a person who knows the truth must act according to the truth. In any case, no one can enter the Garden of Truth whose actions in this world have not been based on truth. Furthermore, no action here below is of any spiritual value if not based on truth.

The famous saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions must not be interpreted as negating the primacy of our intentions over our actions. Rather, this saying refers indirectly to the necessity of basing actions on the truth. Action based on falsehood or ignorance rather than the truth can lead to the most negative consequences even if one holds good intentions. The Sufis would confirm this saying attributed by many to St. Augustine while insisting that God judges our actions according to our intentions. They add, furthermore, that our intentions must be pure and that knowledge of the truth (*al-'ilm*) always precedes action (*al-'amal*). Surely God does not judge us negatively for what we do not know if there is no means at our disposal to overcome our ignorance. But that does not alter the reality that in order to be spiritually efficacious, action must be based upon the truth, especially for those who want to set out upon the path to the Garden of Truth. To be based upon the truth means of course to be in accord with the profound reality and nature of things and also according to God's Will to the extent that we are able to know that Will. It must be in accordance with justice and characterized by compassion and goodness, which are inseparable from the very substance of things not in their outward appearance but as they are in their inner reality and at the root of their existence.

To act with truth is also to act with love and compassion because truth is ultimately reality and love flows through all levels of cosmic

reality, in the arteries of the universe. Action carried out on the basis of passions and selfish desires can lead to gain or loss in the short run according to circumstance but will always bring about negative consequences in the long run. But love is like knowledge. The more one gives, the more one gains. To act with love means to always give without expectation of receiving in return. But because action with love breaks the walls of the ego and makes us realize that deep down the other is also our self, one receives the greatest recompense in return. As we saw earlier, it is God's command for us to love the neighbor and treat him or her as ourselves, as asserted by Christ as well as the Prophet. But in order for these acts of love to be spiritually efficacious, they must be based on our love for God. As for knowledge, the more one teaches to a student, the more one becomes a master of the knowledge that one transmits; in the same way that the more one gives of one's love, the more one experiences love. To act with love toward the other, however, without love for God is to act against the truth, for in truth the other, like us, comes from God, and it is His love for His creation that makes possible our love for the other.

Of course, no action with truth or love is possible without what the Abrahamic religions call the fear of God. There is an element in the soul that must be controlled through the fear of God in order for the flowers of illuminative knowledge and spiritual love to grow in the soil of the soul. We have already stated that Muslims do not believe in original sin, but they do believe in the fall (*al-hubūt*) of men and women from their state of primordial perfection. As the Quran asserts, "We created man in the best of stature; then reduced him to the state of the lowest of the low" (Quran 95:4-5). The Quran also refers to the soul of fallen humanity as possessing an element that commands and incites the soul to evil (*al-naḥs al-ammārah bi'l-sū*). This element did not exist in actuality in the Edenic state before the fall, but after the fall it became a part of the human soul. Hence the necessity of the fear of God, which serves to control this powerful element that exists within fallen humanity and that has become practically second nature to us.

Sufism, which contains the science and the art of curing the ailments of the soul, speaks often of this passionate and evil-inciting *naḥs*. In fact, the word *naḥs*, which means soul or psyche, is often used in Sufi texts to signify this lower element of the soul and not the higher elements, which participate in the final wedding between the soul and the Spirit. Even the most exalted Sufi texts on love and knowledge remind

us of the necessity of fearing God before being able to love and know Him; they emphasize that action cannot be performed with truth and love unless it is based on reverential fear of the One who in contrast to His creatures draws us toward Himself even through fear of Him.

Coming back to action with love, a word must also be said about the role of compassion in Islam in general and Sufism in particular. Although God is just and majestic and also the Supreme Judge who judges our actions and can become wrathful if human beings do not act according to His Will and in goodness, according to the already stated sacred *ḥadīth* it is written on the Divine Throne, “Verily, my Mercy (compassion) precedeth my Wrath.” The Arabic word used in this saying is *rahmah*, which means at once goodness, mercy, and compassion. This word is related etymologically to the two Divine Names, *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, which can be translated as the Infinitely Good and All-Merciful or All-Compassionate. These two Names along with the supreme Name of God in Islam, *Allāh*, constitute the formula called *basmalah* (*Bismi’Llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*), with which Muslims begin all human actions worthy before the eyes of God, including such daily acts as starting the day, having a meal, going to sleep, or embarking upon a journey. It is in fact with this formula that this book begins. All the chapters of the Quran except one, moreover, start with this formula.

As mentioned earlier, the whole of the cosmos is understood by Sufis to have become existentiated through *nafas al-Raḥmān*, usually translated as the “Breath of the Compassionate.” The Islamic universe is therefore plunged in the ocean of compassion. If we were only to understand the nature of things, we would realize that being compassionate is the most natural thing, in total accord with the deeper nature of all beings, including ourselves. Unfortunately, the imprisoning walls of the ego prevent this compassion from manifesting itself in most cases. The soul needs to be treated of its illness in order to be compassionate.

The Sufis, who aspire to enter the Garden of Truth, emphasize the Divine Mercy and Compassion, which precedes God’s Wrath without in any way forgetting the significance of inner discipline and the necessity of living according to God’s laws, thus abstaining from actions that can incur His Wrath. Nor do they forget the positive nature of holy anger when one is faced with falsehood and injustice. In Christianity holy anger is even associated with some of the saints and also certain

episodes of the life of Christ—in a religion that is predominantly a religion of love. The same is seen in another form in Mahāyāna Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion as the central virtue.

Sufism asks its followers to ponder the meaning of compassion. The English word often used to translate *rahmah*, that is, *compassion*, reveals through its etymology some of the profoundest meanings of this concept. The term implies coming together and sharing of passion in the sense of ardent love. It also implies sharing the suffering and pain of others as our own. A famous poem of Sa'dī states:

The children of Adam are members of a single body,
For from the moment of creation they were made of one substance.
When fate causes pain in any member,
The other members cannot remain still.
O thou who hath no sorrow in seeing the sorrow of others,
Thou art not worthy of being called a human being.⁴

Although Sa'dī speaks only of the human family in this poem, the virtue of compassion is not to be limited to humanity. Since *all* of the cosmos was existentially created by the “Breath of the Compassionate,” our compassion must also extend to all beings, to animals and plants as well as to air and water and also to mountains, deserts, streams, and oceans, all of which have their own mode of life. We need not be compassionate toward the stars because fortunately our actions cannot reach them, at least for now, to pollute and disfigure the heavens as we have done the earth. A partial compassion, which would limit itself to the human species with total disregard for other creatures, is not real compassion, based as it is on the ignorance rather than knowledge of the interconnection of all beings. This partial compassion can in fact lead in the long run to much greater suffering, as the environmental crisis demonstrates so amply. In the same way, a sentimental charity devoid of the truth has led to some of the most ruthless social and political upheavals of the past century, as one sees in Communism, which is based on charity toward the poor and compassion for the working class while denying the reality of God, whose love and compassion for His creatures make possible our compassion toward others. On the level of action there must be both knowledge and love combined with

compassion in order for the action to be efficacious, while conversely righteous action itself prepares the soul for ascent to the realms of love and knowledge and access to the Garden of Truth by freeing its wings from the fetters of this world and selfish actions.

DETACHMENT AND SURRENDER: TO DO GOD'S WILL

The first steps on the path to the Garden of Truth consist of detachment from the world and surrender to God, which means attachment to Him. By *world* we mean here not theophanies and signs of God that surround us even in this terrestrial abode, but the world as the veil that covers the truth and disperses our soul. The roots of our fallen human soul are sunk deeply in the soil of this world. The first action to take is to pluck these roots out of that which is transient and evanescent and sink them into the Divine Reality. At first this Divine Reality appears as unreal since our soul has become externalized and scattered, depending only on the outer senses for its awareness of what is real and what is illusory. Awakening from the sleep of forgetfulness, which is the necessary condition for following the path, brings about the realization that the world that we usually take as being the sole reality is itself a dream. The Prophet once said, "Man is asleep and when he dies he awakens." Spiritual discipline in Sufism commences with what is called "initiatic death" followed by awakening. Through the rite of initiation into a Sufi order, the disciple is supposed to die to his or her old self to be born anew. It is this transformation that is called initiatic death, and it is also found in the esoteric dimension of other traditions, including the Greek mystery religions.

The uprooting of the soul from this world requires the action of detachment and living in such a way as to be pure. It is to wear already inwardly the white shroud in which Muslims are wrapped when they are buried. The virtue connected with this detachment, combined with purity, has been often associated in Sufism with *taqwā*, or reverential fear of God combined with purity of action and mindfulness. This word is one of the most often used terms in the Quran and is hardly translatable into a single English term. In order to follow the path of Sufism one must possess *taqwā*, and the inhabitants of the Garden are all possessors of this virtue in addition to the perfections they have gained through love and knowledge of God. There is nothing

more dangerous for the soul, spiritually speaking, than seeking to be drowned in the ocean of Divine Love and becoming illuminated by the Divine Light without *taqwā*. The practice of *taqwā* is at first difficult precisely because it requires detachment from the world and control of our passions, which are like a dragon within. *Taqwā* is like the lance of St. Michael, which is able to slay this dragon before the dragon consumes us with its fire—the fire of hell. The history of Sufism, especially its earliest period, is witness to many Sufi saints who attained supreme gnosis but kept emphasizing the necessity of *taqwā* and the reverential fear of God that it implies.

Detachment from the world must be accompanied by attachment to God through surrender to Him. It might be said that all beings are in surrender (*taslīm*) to God by virtue of existing within the confines of their particular nature as created by God. This is one of the meanings of *muslim*, that is, being in surrender to God. But we differ from other creatures in having free will. We therefore are free to surrender our will to God or rebel against the Will of Heaven. God has given this free will precisely because in humanity He created a being worthy of being His interlocutor, a being reflecting all the Divine Names and Qualities, a being whom He loves and who can and should love God. As mentioned before, on the human plane love cannot be based on coercion if it is to be real love. The lover values the love of his or her beloved precisely because this love is given in freedom and is based on free will. In any case, basing ourselves on our consciousness and immediate experience, we have the certitude of having free will. It must be remembered, however, that we have relative free will on the level of our own reality, which is itself relative, and that we cannot possess absolute freedom while bound to this relative state of existence. We can gain absolute freedom only by transcending our relative mode of existence and becoming immersed in the illimitable ocean of divine and absolute Reality.

To gain that absolute freedom we must exercise our relative freedom in giving up this freedom and surrendering our will to God, thereby becoming attached to Him. This action, which complements detachment from the world, must begin with surrender, *islām*, which in Arabic means both surrender and gaining of peace. This surrender must also be combined with confidence in God (*tawakkul*). In human life we often surrender our will to the will of someone we love, but even this kind of surrender becomes sometimes difficult. How much

more difficult it is to surrender our will to God, whom most of us have not as yet experienced! Nevertheless, since God resides at the center of our being, with faith in Him those who aspire to reach Him surrender their will to Him as we see in the case of Bāyazīd Bastāmī discussed previously. This great Sufi did not will this or that but his only wish was not to will so that he would not desire anything independent of what God willed for him. He also said the prince of this world is one who cannot choose anything because God has already chosen for him.

The Lord's Prayer, uttered by Christ himself, states, "Thy Will be done on earth." For Muslims the doing of God's Will on earth begins with the practice of the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law, which Islam considers as the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will for its followers. Not only are we free, however, to follow or not follow the injunctions of the *Shari'ah*, but the teachings of the *Shari'ah* still leave many domains and arenas of life to our discernment and free will. That is why it is not easy to be certain that we are doing God's Will in so many of our activities.

Throughout history there have been figures in Islam, Christianity, and other religions who wreaked havoc upon society and committed the worst kinds of injustice and iniquitous acts by claiming to be doing the Will of God. That is why Sufism emphasizes the necessity of *taqwā*, or reverential fear of God, before claiming to do God's Will in this world, for the gaining of *taqwā* is itself the first act that God wishes us to perform. Surrendering one's will to Him necessitates having the free will to surrender. But how can we surrender our free will to God if our will is still a slave of our passions and in surrender to the world? There can be no true *taslim* and *tawakkul* without *taqwā*.

The complete surrender of one's will to God is a high spiritual station transcending the realm of action for it involves the attachment of our whole being to Him and the sacrifice of our passionate ego before the altar of the One. It requires a most difficult form of *jihad* within our souls. The verse of the Quran quoted at the beginning of this chapter addresses the Prophet in these terms: "Thou didst not throw when thou threwest; rather it was God who threw" (Quran 8:17). The spiritual station of "thou didst not throw when thou threwest" (*mā ramayta idh ramayt*) is considered by Sufis to be an extremely exalted spiritual station. For ordinary men and women who believe, there is only one act wherein one can be certain of doing God's Will and that is death. Pious men and women also try to do His Will in their lives

by performing righteous actions, such as charitable works, according to the teachings of their religion. Those who aspire to reach the Garden also perform good works, but in addition they seek to be attached to God in such a way that everything they do reflects the Divine Reality within and beyond them rather than the whims and fancies of their passionate souls.

In any case, detachment and attachment on the plane of action involve the various faculties of the soul in countless ways and prepare the soul for the love and knowledge of God. That is why it was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the roads to the Garden are paved with correct action. The cycle of fear, love, and knowledge of God, the *makhāfah*, *maḥabbah*, and *maʿrifah* of Sufism, must be experienced by all souls journeying toward the goal of perfection. The history of Sufism itself is also characterized by these three dimensions of spirituality following one upon the other, from the asceticism of the early Mesopotamian Sufis to the flowering of love especially in the School of Khurasan to the gnostic teachings of a figure such as Junayd and the School of Baghdad and associated especially with the School of Ibn ʿArabī. But in the historical unfolding of Sufism, the later developments contain the earlier ones, and this development in Sufism as a whole must not be considered as progress in the ordinary sense of the term so that one would place later Sufi saints above earlier ones. As for the soul, these stages mark its journey toward its ultimate goal, and the soul contains permanently within itself the spiritual effects of the earlier stages of its journey.

OUR SPIRITS ARE OUR BODIES AND OUR BODIES ARE OUR SPIRITS

An esoteric saying attributed to the Shiʿite Imams says, “Our spirits are our bodies and our bodies are our spirits” (*arwāḥunā ajsādunā wa ajsādunā arwāḥunā*). This saying has many meanings, one of which is that in the other world the effect of our actions on the soul become corporealized. Here, we are not concerned with the eschatological significance of this saying but with its establishing of a direct rapport between the soul and the body. As already mentioned, on the one hand our souls affect our actions, and on the other hand our actions affect our souls, this effect being related especially to the intention behind an act. We are responsible for our actions because we have free will, and this will

resides in the soul. I am responsible for what my pen held in my hand is writing right now because I have the free will to not write what you are reading but something else. I am not responsible for the flow of blood in the vessels of my hand at this moment because that is beyond the control of my mind and will. No action, even within our own bodies, can affect our souls spiritually if the soul has no control over that action even if there be physiological and psychological effects. Certain illnesses can bring about depression, and from the other side controlling our anger can reduce our blood pressure.

Spiritually speaking, however, the body as the instrument of our actions interacts with the soul in numerous ways based on our voluntary actions and conscious and free choice. There is also the obvious fact that while we live in this world we are given control over much of our bodies through which we act physically upon the world and receive the effects of the world upon us. While we make the spiritual and moral choice to do or not to do this or that, we use our hands and feet, tongues and eyes, to actualize what the soul has willed according to our intention. Therefore, although from one point of view the body is a prison in this world from which we must try to escape, from another point of view it is our companion on the journey to God. The subtle bodies within us survive physical death, and Muslims, like traditional Christians, believe in corporeal and not only spiritual resurrection. That is why a Sufi philosopher such as Suhrawardī, who lived in the twelfth century, speaks of the body as the “Temple of Light” and other Sufis have spoken of the luminous bodies of saints, as we also see in Orthodox and Catholic Christianity and elsewhere. In a sense, in the posthumous states, we have bodies woven of our actions in this world and the nexus between the soul and body continues beyond the grave. In the spiritual journey we must transcend the plane of action associated with the body for the exalted horizons of Divine Love and Knowledge, but the physical body remains a part of our total reality to be integrated at the end in our full and complete being.

PRAYER: THE INTEGRATING OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT

In various religions there are three modes of prayer, and Islam is no exception: individual supplications, canonical prayers, and what Sufism, like Christianity, calls the prayer of the heart. Not all the three modes

are performed by everyone belonging to an integral religious tradition, but they are certainly all used in Sufism. In Christianity all the three modes can be found in Hesychasm, the mystical dimension of Orthodox Christianity, not to mention the mysticism of the Latin Church. In fact, prayer like metaphysics is universal and found across religious borders. If prayer is discussed in this chapter devoted to action, it is because in most of its forms it is an act but an act that, while often associated with the body including the tongue, transcends the corporeal and unites body, soul, and spirit.

Sufism, as the rest of Islam and also other religions, includes in its practices individual prayers and supplications in which the faithful speak to God in either silence or vocally in their own language and open their hearts to Him. Muslims also perform canonical prayers (*al-ṣalāh*), whose form has descended from Heaven, and through their performance the individual worshipper conforms his or her particular soul to a form and reality that transcends the individual. The movements of the body and what the tongue recites (always in Arabic) were revealed to the Prophet by God, according to Islamic belief; they are not man-made. Through these prayers, the individual grows into a form that transcends him or her. If performed with perfect intention, total concentration, and in-depth understanding, these prayers reintegrate the human being into his or her archetypal reality. In the case of these canonical prayers, the body plays a very important role. Its various postures, all impregnated with profound symbolic significance, help to integrate the soul while also serving as the vehicle for the integration of the body, soul, and spirit. In these conditions the body is seen no longer as a prison of the soul but as its complement, a steed that the soul rides on its way to the Garden. While performing these ritual acts associated with the body as perfectly as possible, the person utters the various verses of the Quran and formulae that together constitute the canonical prayers. If the inner meaning of this mode of prayer is understood, one sees that it contains all the stages for our journey to God. That is why the *ṣalāh* is called the spiritual ascent (*al-mi'rāj*) of the faithful, in allusion to the nocturnal ascent of the Prophet bodily to Heaven from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the ascent that serves as the prototype for all Sufi journeying to the One.

As for the prayer of the heart, it is associated in Sufism with *dhikr*, or invocation of God's Names. This quintessential form of prayer begins with invocation with the tongue, then with the mind and with our

imaginal faculty, and finally with and in the heart, where the Divine Spark has always resided. Inasmuch as the body is the extension and projection of the heart, this prayer can also be associated with prayer by the body, but a body in which the Spirit resides in an active way. Some Hesychast masters considered the saint as a person whose spirit resides completely in his or her body while a Sufi such as Rūmī said that one should invoke until one's toe says, "*Allāh, Allāh.*" In this highest form of prayer there is a complete integration of body, soul, and spirit in a consciousness that transcends the individual level.

The *dhikr* is in the final analysis the act of God Himself within us. In reality only God can utter His Name, and in the *dhikr* we become simply the instrument through which God utters His own sacred Name. In the *dhikr* the prayer of Christ, "Thy Will be done," is realized in the most essential way, for in order to invoke with concentration, the one who invokes must surrender all of the will and mind to God and place the whole of his or her being in God's Hands. In this process, the invocation of the Name, whose abode is the heart, transforms not only one's soul, psyche, imagination, and mind, but also the body. We see similar uses of the body in Yoga, certain schools of Buddhism, and many other spiritual disciplines. This quintessential mode of prayer, or the prayer of the heart, also brings about the wedding between action, love, and knowledge as it integrates body, soul, and spirit.

Those who follow the path of action and good works seek to live a righteous life and to enter Paradise when they die. Those who follow the path of love and knowledge seek God here and now and aim at this very moment at the highest Paradise, which is the Garden of Truth, what the Quran calls *Riḍwān*, where the Gardener is to be found, the Paradise that is also here and now in the center of our being. In ordinary prayer men and women address God in an I-Thou relationship. In the prayer that is intertwined with love, the I and the Thou melt into each other. In contemplative prayer, the inner intellect or spirit, which is itself a Divine Spark to which Meister Eckhart refers when he says that there is in the soul something uncreated and uncreatable and that something is the Intellect (*aliquid est in anima quod increatus et increabile et hoc est intellectus*), is able to transcend the I-Thou dichotomy altogether. This faculty is able to plunge into the Supreme Reality and, in drowning in the Ocean of Divinity, to know it. It is to these realities that Plotinus was referring when he spoke of the flight of the alone to the Alone. In the *dhikr* all of the elements of our being are integrated,

and prayer in its quintessential form becomes the means par excellence for unifying body, soul, and spirit and integrating in our being the paths of action, love, and knowledge.

So far we have traveled a long way by posing the universal questions concerning our identity, origin, and end. We have spoken of the Garden of Truth and the significance of the ways of knowledge, love, and action in our spiritual lives. It is now time to answer concretely the question of how we can reach the Garden of Truth and what are the different components of the path leading to that Garden. In a sense we have completed the description of the *theoria* or vision of what we could also call the mountain of Truth. Let us now turn to the nature of the path leading to its summit and see how we can ascend this path or, in other words, how to reach the gate of the Garden of Truth and gain entry therein.