

Five



HOW DO WE REACH THE GARDEN OF TRUTH?

The Path to the One

Guide us upon the straight path.

Quran 1:6

There are as many paths to God as the children
of Adam.

Ḥadīth

The spiritual master of the person who has no
spiritual master is Satan.

Bāyazīd Bastāmī



THE STRAIGHT PATH

Five times each day, Muslim men and women all over the world stand before God in prayer and recite the opening chapter of the Quran, which, as already mentioned, includes the verse "Guide us upon the straight path" (Quran 1:6). The straight path concerns our basic relation as human beings to God. To be guided upon the straight path is not only to follow God's Will and His laws here on earth, but in the highest sense it is to ascend to the Divine Reality. To reach the Garden requires following this path of ascent, which, moreover, can be seen as both a journey beyond ourselves to the Reality that is transcendent and a penetration within to that same Reality in its aspect of immanence residing in our heart center. The idea of the Straight Path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) is so central to Muslims that they identify Islam as the religion of the straight path. For Sufis it means above all the path of ascent to God. When Sufis recite this verse, they concentrate on the vertical and atemporal rather than the temporal and horizontal trajectory of the path and pray to God to be guided now on the path of ascent and therefore to transcendence of ordinary human consciousness and life, a path that is also one of inwardness, until they reach "there," which is also "here" at the center of our being. According to the *Ḥadīth*, "the heart of the person of faith is the Throne of the All-Good (and Compassionate)," that is, God.

This path leading one from the periphery of the circle of existence to its Center is called in Arabic *al-ṭarīq* or *al-ṭarīqah*, and this is also the term used for a particular Sufi order. As long as we are in the human state, there exists a link that binds us directly to God and a path that we can follow to reach Him whether we accept or reject the Divine and the path leading to Him. As Rūmī said:

There is a link, without asking how, without analogy,
Between the Lord of man and the soul of man.¹

THE PATH

In Islam the path of ascent to God in this life goes back to the origin of the tradition, to the inner dimension of the Quran and the inner reality of the Prophet as the Universal Man. Any integral religion must

offer its followers not only guidance for a righteous life in this world and the hope of the beatific vision in the next, but also the means of attaining that vision in this life for those who aspire to intimacy with God while still in this world. Those two dimensions of religion have been often called the exoteric and the esoteric, or inward and outward. It must not be forgotten that in the Quran God Himself is called both the Outward (*al-Zāhir*) and the Inward (*al-Bāṭin*). In the same way that the Gospel of John or the Song of Solomon in the Bible are esoteric, certain verses of the Quran have clearly an esoteric meaning, such as “Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God” (Quran 2:115). The *Ṭarīqah* is the way that, if followed, allows us to realize this truth. That is why the full name of the *ṭarīqah* is *al-ṭarīqah ila’Llāh*, the path to God.

Not only certain verses of the Quran but also many of the sayings of the Prophet constitute the revealed and canonical basis for the *Ṭarīqah*, especially those sayings that are called *sacred* sayings, or *al-aḥādīth al-qudsiyyah*. The *ḥadīth* of “I was a Hidden Treasure” mentioned earlier belongs to this category. Among those who were privileged to be companions of the Prophet, many possessed saintly qualities, as we see also in the apostolic period of other religions such as Christianity. But a small number are especially known as those to whom the esoteric teachings of Islam were transmitted, such as Abū Bakr, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, and Salmān al-Fārsī. But the main figure in the transmission of the inner teachings of Islam was ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the first cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. ‘Alī appears at the beginning of the spiritual chain (*al-silsilah*) of almost all *ṭuruq* (plural of *ṭarīqah*) in both the Sunni and the Shi‘ite worlds whatever their differences might be on the external role of ‘Alī after the death of the Prophet. The famous saying of the Prophet, “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Alī is its gate,” has been interpreted by followers of the path, who in the eighth century came to be known as Sufis, to mean not just any form of knowledge but knowledge of the Garden of Truth as well as the knowledge that leads to that Garden.

Sufism interacted later with other forms of spirituality and intellectuality, including Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian and metaphysical expositions such as Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. These interactions, however, concerned only external forms and symbols or intellectual aids for the expression of the truth. The Sufis sometimes made use of propitious and efficacious symbols and intellectual formulations from other traditions appropriate for pointing to

a spiritual reality that is purely Islamic. The essence of Sufism is rooted in the Quranic revelation and the inner reality of the Prophet, and its practice is made possible solely through the transmission of initiatic power (*walāyah/wilāyah*) going back to the Prophet. Gradually, on the basis of these earliest teachings, a number of disciples assembled around spiritual guides, and these assemblies became in turn foundations for the major Sufi orders that appeared later.

WHAT IS *WALĀYAH/WILĀYAH*?

The Arabic root of the terms *walāyah/wilāyah* is *waly*. This root has numerous meanings, including having domination over something, lordship, sanctity, being a master, ruler, friend, and intimate. In Arabic orthography one can read the term in question as both *walāyah* and *wilāyah*, and over the centuries authorities have debated how it should be pronounced since this affects the meaning of the term. That is why I have written it in both forms. To indicate the breadth of meaning of this key concept, it is sufficient to mention that first of all it is related to a Name of God (*al-Wālī*). In addition, *wālī* means ruler or governor in the political realm, but also *wālī Allāh* means saint (literally, “friend of God”) in the intellectual and spiritual sphere. *Mawlā* (from which most likely the Persian term *mullā* derives) had a social meaning in early Islamic history and signified non-Arabs attached to a particular Arab tribe, but it is also an honorific title meaning master as, for example, when reference is made to Rūmī by most of his disciples as *Mawlānā*, that is, our Master. Furthermore, one of the names of the Mahdī or Twelfth Imam in Shi‘ism is *Walī al-‘aṣr*, the Ruler of the Epoch.

Fallen human beings are cut off from the higher or more inward dimensions of their own being and confined to the prison of the ego. Furthermore, the gates to the higher states are locked for the ordinary person. The Sufis believe that in addition to the function of prophecy (*al-nubuwwah*), bestowed upon the Prophet by God, he was also given the initiatic power of *walāyah/wilāyah*. His prophetic function brought about the establishment of the Divine Law or *Sharī‘ah*, and his power of *walāyah/wilāyah* the *Ṭarīqah* or the Way through which the doors of this prison are unlocked and the journey beyond the individual self is made possible. Furthermore, he was the “seal of prophecy,” and with his death the prophetic cycle came to an end. But the function

of *walāyah/wilāyah* continued and has been transmitted from generation to generation until our own day and will continue until the end of time. No Muslim has ever accepted that prophecy continued after the death of the Prophet, while Sufis as well as mainstream Shi'ites believe that we are still living in the cycle of *walāyah/wilāyah* and that the "Muḥammadan Light" and the Muḥammadan grace (*barakah*) continue to be transmitted through initiation and spiritual practice from generation to generation.

In any case, when a person wishes to embark upon the path to the Garden, he or she must find an authentic spiritual master in whom this power is present and receive through a rite that goes back to the Prophet the initiation transmitting the power of *walāyah/wilāyah* to him or her. Through this rite the locks on the door that opens to the path of ascent or inwardness are removed. It is now for the disciple to open the door and to march upon the path to God through spiritual practice and by God's Grace. To become a friend of God or saint, one must be able to fly in the heavenly empyrean lifted by the power of the current of *walāyah/wilāyah* but also to exert effort by using the wings of the soul. There are of course those who are drawn to Heaven through the power of spiritual attraction alone and beyond their will. But they are the exceptions who prove the rule. They are often called *majdhūb*, that is, totally attracted to God and by God, but they cannot guide others because they have not traversed the steps of the path. As for those who have, they are called travelers (singular, *al-sālik*), and they constitute most of those who reach the exalted station of knocking on the door of the gate to the Garden of Truth. They are those who have undergone spiritual training under the direction of an authentic master and have journeyed through all the stages of the path.

THE SPIRITUAL MASTER AND THE DISCIPLE

The Master

In the Quran in chapter 18 (*al-Kahf* verses 65ff.) there is a famous story of Moses, representing here the bringer of Law and hence the exoteric aspect of religion, and Khaḍir (more commonly known as Khidr), the mysterious prophet who is associated in Judaism with Elias and the Eliatic function of initiation and spiritual guidance, hence also

for Islam the esoteric dimension of religion. Moses asks to accompany him on the journey, but he first refuses until Moses promises not to be critical of any of his actions.

They set out on a boat, and in the middle of the sea Khidr begins to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. Moses protests, and Khidr reminds him of his promise. Then they meet a young man whom Khidr slays. Again Moses protests, and again Khidr reminds him of his promise. Finally they come to a town, where the people refuse them hospitality. Khidr and Moses find a wall in ruin whereupon Khidr rebuilds the wall. Moses asks him why he did this free of charge in such an inhospitable town whereas he could have been paid for his labor. Khidr declares that since Moses keeps criticizing his actions he can no longer travel with Khidr, but before departing from Moses he reveals to him the inner meaning of the acts he performed, pointing out through his explanations the truth that every outward form has an inner meaning. Khidr tells Moses that he drilled a hole in the boat to prevent it from going farther to a place where a king was confiscating all the ships; since this boat belonged to poor people, Khidr wanted to prevent its confiscation. As for the young man, his parents were believers and he was a disbeliever who was oppressing them and going to kill them. God would replace him with pious and merciful progeny. Finally, as for the wall in that town, there was hidden underneath it a treasure belonging to two orphans and left there by a righteous father. He rebuilt the wall so that the treasure would not be unearthed and taken by others but would be preserved until the orphans came of age. Moses and Khidr leave the town, but through these new experiences Moses is made aware of the inner reality of things hidden from him before undertaking the journey.

This story is the prototype of the function of the spiritual master to instruct disciples and to reveal to them when they are ripe for the understanding of the inner significance of things. In Sufi literature, in fact, the spiritual master, who is usually called *shaykh*, *pīr* (both meaning elder), *murshid* (the guide), and *murād* (the person sought by the will of the disciple), is also called the Khidr of the spiritual path (*khiḍr-i rāh* in Persian). As Ḥāfiẓ says in one of his famous poems:

We are traversing darkness, where is the Khidr of the Path?
If he not be here, the fire of deprivation will our worth destroy.²

The spiritual wine, the pure wine mentioned in the Quran and cited so often in Sufi works, is at once the fire of Divine Love and the light of illuminative knowledge and gnosis. It is also the invocation of God's Names. The disciple is the vessel, into which this wine is poured once the vessel is emptied of its pungent liquid of selfish passions. The spiritual master is therefore the *saki* who pours the celestial wine into the being of the disciple. The serious seeker is in quest of the authentic *saki* and does not cease his or her quest until the *saki* is found.

Where art thou O Saki, where art thou?
Come forth for my soul yearns for that wine,
That ruby wine tasted by the pure in paradise.
Come O Saki pour thy wine into the vessel of my soul,
Wherever thou art, I shall search and find thee,
And having found thee shall never let thee go,
Until my thirst is quenched and my being drenched
In that wine which we drank in the pre-eternal dawn,
And shall drink again in the beatific eve of our earthly life.³

A *shaykh* or spiritual master may be appointed by his or her own master, or the function may descend from Heaven upon the person. In both cases there is need of divine investiture. Throughout history many people have pretended to be masters and at no time as much as now, especially in the West. During the past century there have appeared a number of so-called Sufi circles in both America and Europe that disassociate Sufism from Islam and that claim as so-called masters some whose attachment to the traditional chain of transmission of esoteric power and authority (*silsilah*) is either absent, suspect, or mysteriously hidden. A case in point is Gurdjieff, who claimed in the early twentieth century in France to be disseminating Sufi teachings without ever demonstrating his attachment to an authentic Sufi chain. Or one could mention Idris Shah, who sought to teach Sufism independent of Islam in America and Europe. The authenticity of a master is judged by the quality of his or her disciples for as the proverb states, a tree is judged by its fruit. But there are also some external criteria for determining who is a real master, such as orthodoxy in the deepest sense and not only on the formal plane, familiarity with the doctrine, mastery in being able to cure the ailments of the soul, spiritual authority, and an element of

sanctity. The master may be old or young, male or female, Arab, Persian, Turk, or from any other ethnicity but in all cases must exude something of the Muḥammadan grace, or *barakah*, and display knowledge of the path for which he or she is the guide. One of the greatest Sufi masters of the past century writes in a poem that pertains to himself:

Friends, if the truth of my state ye have understood,
 Here lies your path before you: follow in my footsteps,
 For by Heaven, there are no doubts, no vague imaginings;
 I know God, with knowledge part secret, part proclaimed.
 I drank the cup of love, and then possessed it,
 And it hath become my possession for all time.
 God reward him who lavished his Secret upon me,
 For bounty, true bounty, is to bestow the Secret.
 I hid the Truth at a time, and screened It well;
 And whoso keepeth God's Secret shall have his reward.
 Then when the Ever vouchsafed that I might proclaim It,
 He fitted me—how I know not—to purify souls,
 And girded upon me the sword of steadfastness,
 And truth and piety, and a Wine He gave me,
 Which all who drink must needs be always drinking,
 Even as a drunkard seeketh to be more drunk.
 Thus came I to pour It—nay, it is I that press It.
 Doth any other pour It in this age?⁴

This poem contains the basic features of being a true Sufi master, including the ability to guard the secrets of God as well as to divulge what needs to be divulged to those ready to receive it. Sufism is sometimes called the School of Secrets (*asrār*), the latter term referring to the Divine Mystery. The function of the master is to receive those Mysteries, realize the Divine Knowledge, attain the wine, and pour it into each cup, that is, the being of each disciple according to his or her capacity. The master represents the authority of the Prophet in the domain of *walāyah*/*āyah* and reflects within his or her own being the Divine Names of Mercy as well as Rigor. But above all the master is a reflection on the human plane of the Divine Name, the Guide (*al-Hādī*), by virtue of which he or she is able to pour the wine into the cups of the being of the disciples.

Not everyone, even if initiatically qualified, is apt to be the disciple of every master he or she encounters, even if the disciple be qualified, nor is every master appropriate for every disciple even if he or she be spiritually authentic. There are different human types and various dimensions to the vast spiritual reality that Sufism embraces. In the same way that through His Mercy God has revealed different religions to correspond to the needs of different human activities and within Islam has made possible the development of many Sufi orders, within each of which He has brought forth *shaykhs* with various characteristics. It is natural that members of a particular order will aggrandize and in some cases even absolutize the stature of their master, as many followers of a religion absolutize their own religion and the message of its founder. In both cases there is an element of absoluteness present. The "sense of the absolute" in a religion or in an authentic spiritual path does not, however, negate other authentic paths or other religious traditions since they also come from the Absolute.

Today there are not as many great Sufi masters as in days of old. And yet one can find authentic masters in both East and West even amid so much pseudo-Sufism. This type of phenomenon, claiming Sufi origins but being usually cut off from Islam—flourishing, unfortunately, so easily in the West today, whereas the authentic Sufi master and his or her teachings that are deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition and always begin with the foundations of the Divine Law (*shari'ah*) has greater difficulty functioning appropriately. The role of the disciple is to seek an authentic master, one to whom he or she can submit completely. The person seeking guidance must always remember the initiatic saying of Christ, "Many are called but few are chosen."

The Disciple

Many have asked, if there is revelation and the Divine Law, why does one need a master? It needs to be made clear first of all that the Sufi master does not correspond to a priest, who acts as an intermediary between the laity and God in high-church Christianity. In Islam the priestly function is divided among the faithful and Muslims face God directly in the canonical prayers, which correspond in many ways to the Christian Eucharist. The difference between the two is that (in high liturgical traditions) the latter needs the presence of a priest or ordained minister, while in the Muslim canonical prayers a Muslim, man or

woman, performs the priestly function himself or herself. The role of the Sufi master is something else. It involves guidance in climbing the cosmic mountain and even flying beyond it, transcending the ordinary human state. The practice of religion, which is meant for everyone, is like walking on level ground or this “horizontal straight path.” The Sufi path, however, is like mountain climbing or the “vertical straight path.” Anyone who is able to walk can do so on this “horizontal path” by himself or herself, and of course with Divine confirmation, for even on the horizontal plane one can become lost. Mountain climbing is, however, something else. Especially in high mountains one cannot do it without an experienced guide as well as, of course, Divine aid. Now, the cosmic mountain is vastly higher than the peaks of the Himalayas, and one needs a guide to reach its peak and to ascend ever further to the Infinite Reality beyond the cosmos. Yes, some have achieved the climb successfully without a human guide, through the agencies of what Sufism calls “absent” or invisible guides (*rijāl al-ghayb*), such as Khidr, or the Hidden Imam. But they represent the exception and not the rule. In Sufism the duties laid upon the shoulders of the disciples require their being active and not only in a passive state of waiting for graces to descend from Heaven, although he or she must possess both active and passive perfection. That is why the disciple is called *murīd*, that is, the person who exercises his or her will, or *sālik*, which means traveler. It is as a traveler seeking to reach the peaks that the disciple has need of a guide, who is none other than the spiritual master.

The very term *disciple* implies discipline. The potential disciple (*mu-riid*, also called *faqīr* or *darwīsh*) must have several basic qualities in order to be a viable candidate for the Sufi path. That person must first of all become dissatisfied with his or her present state and realize the need for perfection. One cannot pour anything into a cup that is already full. The candidate must therefore have a yearning (*talab*) for God and for his or her own perfection. That person must also possess enough intelligence to realize that this world is transient and ultimately unreal while God is permanent and the Real and that we must attach ourselves to what is Real. He or she must also possess ardor (*himmah*) and a strong will (*irādah*) to actually march upon the path. Above all, the potential disciple must have faith, love God, and have the yearning to know and encounter Him to such an extent that he or she is willing to sacrifice and undergo the necessary discipline to accomplish this task here and now rather than waiting for the afterlife.

Some think that entering Sufism will correct psychological imbalances. Of course, Sufism possesses a science of the cure of the soul, with which we shall deal soon. Spiritual cure, however, is one thing and clinical treatment of psychological illnesses another. Usually the adept must be psychologically wholesome and balanced, which does not mean spiritually perfect. In fact, if a soul were perfect, of what use would the path be? The *Ṭarīqah* is the school wherein the soul gains perfection, but this school is not for everyone. Initiatic requirements include a psyche healthy enough to be able to bear the weight of the spiritual practices and disciplines of the way.

THE DISCIPLINES OF THE WAY: THE PRACTICES OF THE SUFIS

The first practical question that arises for an aspirant of the path as well as those seeking general knowledge of Sufism in its operative aspect is “what do Sufis do?” And the simple answer is that they undergo a set of physical, psychological, and spiritual disciplines and perform certain practices that make progress upon the path to the Garden of Truth possible. These disciplines begin with the practices of the rites of the *Sharī‘ah*, such as the daily canonical prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and obeying the general moral injunctions of Islam, which bear many similarities to those of Judaism and Christianity. In contrast to what many have written, the vast majority of Sufis are among the most observant of all Muslims in the performance of the *Sharī‘ite* rites, and if this or that Sufi wrote verses pointing to the meaning behind the rites at the expense of outer forms, the aim was to bring out the spiritual dimension of religious practice, not to flout it. Rūmī, who sang,

O people who have gone to the *hajj*, where are you, where
are you;
The Beloved is here come, come

and who called the heart the real Ka‘bah (the cubic temple in Mecca built according to Muslims by Abraham and considered to be the house of God), performed the rites of the *hajj* himself. And Ibn ‘Arabī, who wrote of theophanic prayer, never missed the daily canonical prayers. A very small number of Sufis in each epoch, who were in a state of

spiritual attraction so intense it might be called spiritual drunkenness, did not perform the rites, but even for them there is a *Shari'ite* reason, which is that a drunken person should not perform the sacred rites. For the vast majority of Sufis, the basis of discipline and practice is the prescribed rites of Islam, which they share with other Muslims while seeking to be aware of their inner meaning in performing them.

Sufis also try to follow the actions or wont (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet to the extent possible and are known as close followers of Prophetic *Sunnah* within the traditional Islamic community. We shall discuss the imitation of the Prophet below, but here suffice it to say again that the Sufis seek to be aware of the inner significance of their acts while imitating consciously the quintessential *Sunnah* of the Prophet, and this includes constantly reciting the Quran, which punctuates their lives as it did the life of the person to whom it was revealed. Of course he was the Prophet and the Quran is the Word of God revealed through him so that something of his soul is to be found in the Quran while a Sufi, no matter how exalted his or her spiritual station, cannot gain such an intimacy with the Sacred Text. Nevertheless, frequent recitation of the Quran in emulation of the Prophet brings nearness to God and constitutes an essential Sufi practice. Ibn 'Arabī once said that one should continue to recite Quranic verses until one reaches a state in which one feels as if the Quran were being revealed to the reciter at the moment of the recitation.

It is on the firm basis of these acts and the corresponding states of the soul of the person performing them that the practices specific to Sufism take place. I mentioned in the last chapter quintessential prayer, which in Islam is called *dhikr*, that means invocation, remembrance, and mention. This practice constitutes the central reality of the life of the Sufis. God has revealed certain of His Names in the Quran and thereby sanctified them. In a mysterious way He is present in His Names. To reach the Named, one must invoke the Name (*Ism*) after receiving initiation and under the guidance of a qualified master. One must be present with all of one's being in the invocation until the invoker, the invocation, and the Invoked (*dhākir*, *dhikr*, and *madhkūr*) become one beyond all limitations of individual existence.

Human beings, moreover, possess mental activity, an activity that is, however, usually dispersed. For most men and women, especially in this age, no mental activity is more difficult than concentration and meditation. As Rūmī says, we are not masters of our thoughts; our thoughts

are our masters. Therefore, we need to make use of various forms of meditation, which aid the soul in remaining in the *dhikr* and being able to concentrate on the Reality whose Sacred Name is being invoked. According to Sufism, it is easy to become a saint because all we have to do is to put ourselves through invocation in the Divine Name and put the Divine Name in our heart. But at the same time it is very difficult because we lack the concentration to remain in the Name and do not even know where our spiritual heart, this center of our being, is since it has become covered by a hard crust as a result of our fall and forgetfulness of our true identity. Every Sufi order therefore teaches certain methods of meditation to enable those who embark upon the path to be able to concentrate upon and remain in the *dhikr*, with their minds and imaginal faculties and, in a more advanced stage, with their hearts and even bodies, as well as with their tongues. While forms of *dhikr* are similar in most Sufi orders, forms of meditation differ from one order to another, as do litanies (*awrād*, plural of *wird*), which are usually recited between the canonical prayers and the *dhikr*.

The basic Sufi practice of *dhikr* is therefore combined with *fikr* or meditation and is primarily carried out alone either in spiritual retreat (*khalwah*) or in daily practices at certain moments put aside for this central practice. The *dhikr* involves repetition of a Divine Name or formula sanctified by the revelation, while *fikr* is meditation upon some aspect of the Divine Reality and/or Its manifestations. *Fikr* allows the invoker to concentrate upon the *dhikr* and prevents the mind from wandering. The *dhikr* can also be performed in a gathering of Sufis (*jalwah*) usually in an audible manner and in unison, but sometimes silently. This gathering or assembly is called a *majlis*. It is a sacred gathering that fortifies one's inner life and brings great grace or *barakah* to those fortunate enough to participate in it. It is led by the spiritual master or one of his or her representatives.

THE SPIRITUAL CONCERT (*SAMĀʿ*)

The *majlis* is usually combined with the performance of Sufi songs and a sacred dance that brings the Divine Presence right into the body. In many orders only a drum is used, while in others different traditional instruments such as the reed flute and stringed instruments are employed in addition to percussion. In the old days such gatherings were open only to the members of the order, and this remains true

in many cases even today. But some orders now allow outside observers, chief among them the Khalwatī-Jarrāhī and Mawlawī of Turkey. The Mawlawī Order, founded by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, has developed the most elaborate spiritual concert associated with a whirling that symbolizes the movements of the heavens. This beautiful spiritual concert has attracted the attention of many Westerners, including European travelers to the East in the nineteenth century, and as a result some have associated Sufism with the whirling dervishes.

Most of the classical music of the Islamic peoples has been deeply influenced by Sufism and is meant to be interiorizing, as one sees in the major classical traditions of western Arabic (including Andalusian), eastern Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and north Indian music. Many of the greatest performers of these traditions belonged and still belong to Sufi orders while many orders such as the Mawlawiyyah in the Ottoman world and now Turkey and the Chishtiyyah in the Indian subcontinent have had their own elaborate orchestras. Certain forms of music, such as *qawwālī*, which one hears often in India and Pakistan, were developed exclusively by Sufis. Furthermore, Sufi music is usually closely associated with Sufi poetry.

Sufi music is like a ladder that connects the soul to God. There is a fire in the human soul. If the fire is that of love for God, Sufi music intensifies it, and if it is only the fire of passion, that too is intensified by music. That is why there are conditions set in Sufi orders for participating in the spiritual concert or *samāʿ*, and disciples are required to curb their passions before being able to benefit spiritually from the *samāʿ*. What the *samāʿ* does is to intensify love and longing for God while carrying the soul forward in its journey to the Spirit. The Sufi whose soul is attuned to the celestial harmonies hears the voice of the Friend in that miraculous event, which is the hearing of spiritual music. A poem attributed to Rūmī, who was especially sensitive to the emancipating beauty of traditional music, refers to this miracle in this verse:

Dry wood, dry string, dry skin,
From whence therefore cometh the song of the Friend?

And again it was Rūmī who spoke of the musician beginning to speak of the mysteries of the covenant made in pre-eternity between God and humanity behind the veil of melody. The *samāʿ* carried out

traditionally in Sufi centers (*zāwiyah* in Arabic, *khānqāh* in Persian, Urdu, and most other Indian languages, and *tekke* in Turkish) is traditionally experienced only by members of a particular order, and it is this already spiritually disciplined group that the music addresses, although others can of course benefit from this remarkable art.

THE GOAL OF SUFI PRACTICES

The goal of all Sufi practices is the remembrance of God, but since God is the One and the Absolute, to remember Him in a manner worthy of His Reality, human beings must become integrated and whole. Since He is the Sacred as such, He demands of us all that we are. *Tawhīd* or Divine Oneness, which is the central reality of Islam and Sufism, corresponds in the human state to totality and integration. And so Sufi practices seek to integrate the totality of the subject who is to remember God. In fact, without integration of one's being it is not possible to remember God fully and constantly as the Quran directs the believers to do when it asserts that one should remember God whether one is standing up, sitting down, or on one's side. And the Quran adds, "O ye who have faith, let not your wealth nor your children divert you from the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allāh*). Those who do so, they are the ones who are losers" (Quran 63:9).

There is no monasticism in Islam, and to follow this supreme command of the Quran to remember and invoke God throughout life does not require formal and organized withdrawal from the world, as we find in some forms of Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. But it does require inner withdrawal and detachment from the world considered in its aspect as veil and not as theophany. A dervish once said, "It is not I who have left the world. It is the world that has left me." Modes of leading the life of a follower of Sufism, or being a *mutaṣawwif*, to use the classical Arabic term, can differ greatly outwardly. One could be a scholar or a butcher, a housewife or a general, a king or a beggar and still practice Sufism, as the history of Sufism reveals clearly. But whatever the outward mode of life, the *mutaṣawwif* or dervish must be detached inwardly from the world and attached to God through the invocation of His Sacred Names, an act that must be performed inwardly whatever one might be doing outwardly.

Sufism also usually includes the integration of the contemplative and the active modes of life although one might take more precedence

over the other in different cases. The model of the life of the Prophet, 'Alī, and many of the great saints who came later, such as 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, all display this integration of the contemplative and active lives, which is a hallmark of Sufi spirituality. This fact does not, however, in any way compromise the reality of the superiority of contemplation or knowledge over action and has not prevented a number of Sufis from spending their whole lives on top of mountains or in holy sanctuaries invoking and remembering God. Their effect upon their environment has been, as already mentioned, like that of a lamp, which illuminates the space around it without acting and moving. But for most followers of Sufism the mode of life has been to be in the world but not of the world, as Christ said.

THE SCIENCE OF THE CURE OF SOULS

No one can enter the Garden of Truth whose soul has not been cured of the deviations, dislocations, and dispersions caused by the fall, and especially the consequences of the modernism and secularism of the past few centuries, as a result of which most people live in a world without center. Like other spiritual methods, for example, Yoga, Sufism possesses a science of the soul and the real Sufi master is also a physician who can cure the ailments of the soul of his or her disciples. There is a sacred psychology as well as sacred psychotherapy in Sufism not to be confused in any way with modern secular theories and practices with the same names. Modern psychology speaks of the freedom *of* the self while Sufi psychology has for its goal freedom *from* the self or the ego. Sufi psychology is concerned with the integration of the elements of the soul and its subsequent wedding to the Spirit. This traditional psychology, also amply treated in Hinduism and Buddhism, should in fact be called pneumatology as well as psychology inasmuch as it deals with the spirit or *pneuma* as well as the psyche.

All the elements of our soul were created by God and are precious if they play the role for which they were created. But the souls of most human beings have become chaotic and the various elements of the soul are no longer where they should be or functioning as they should. Fallen man usually loves what he should disdain and disdains what he should love. For example, fallen humanity loves dispersing activity, which should be disdained, and has disdain for contemplative quiet and

calm, which it should love, there being of course exceptions. The fallen human soul is full of knots, which result in all the negative feelings and emotions that the soul experiences, such as anxiety, aggression, egocentrism, depression, and so forth, and these forces lead to the committing of what theologically and morally is called sin or vice. Moreover, the dispersion of the soul, so common today, is related to excessive externalization and loss of the sense of the sacred. Modern society has developed a culture that emphasizes activity over contemplation through the creation of urban spaces full of noise and distraction and of an atmosphere filled with information and advertising, which bombard us all the time. This prevailing atmosphere serves to turn the soul evermore outward and away from its center. Inner peace has become more difficult to attain because of the hectic life that characterizes the human condition in much of the world today. One must remember that there is a correspondence between the ephemeral and transient phenomena in the world and phenomena within the soul. And as like attracts like, the soul that is chaotic within becomes even more mesmerized by the chaotic world that surrounds us today, forgetting its own center and God, who resides at the heart/center of all human beings whether they are aware of this Reality or not.

Yet the soul yearns for wholeness and is never completely satisfied with transient multiplicity even if it derives momentary gratification from the fulfillment of this or that passionate desire. Were there to be no yearning for one's primordial nature, which is always centered and in communion with the Spirit, no one would seek to follow the Sufi path. But some do realize their spiritual illness and search for the physician of the soul who would cure their illness, who would untie the knots of the soul and put its various elements in their proper places, with each faculty in the soul functioning as it was meant to according to the spiritual teachings of various traditions. The medicine given for this process of curing the malady of the soul is spiritual practice and the acquiring of virtues. In one of the most famous *ghazals* in his grand *Dīvān-i Shams*, Rūmī sings:

The proclamation of Heaven hath come, the physician of lovers
hath come,
If thou wishest that he cometh to thee, become ill, become ill.⁵

The first step toward perfection is awareness of our imperfection. Those in need of a physician will not go to one unless they realize they are ill and in need of medical help. This is as true for our souls as it is for our bodies. Those who come to the Sufi master with serious intention are those who realize the imperfections of their inner state and the need to be cured of the illnesses from which their souls suffer before the journey of their life comes to an end.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE MASTER AND THE DISCIPLE

In order to be cured, the disciple has to have complete trust in the physician of the soul to whom he or she has come for help, and there must exist a personal relationship between the disciple and the master. That means not only listening to the master's advice as to what to do but also acting upon it. A prescription from the best of physicians is useless if we simply put it in our pocket. We have to take the medicine that is prescribed even if it be bitter. So it is with the medicine that cures our souls. Sometimes it is bitter and very difficult to take, but we must persevere if we are going to get well. For example, the disciple may be given certain forms of invocation and meditation that are difficult to perform. Or a person with pride may be made to perform such apparently humbling acts as sweeping the floor and cleaning the toilets in order to break the stranglehold of pride upon his or her soul. In any case, there is great significance in having trust in the spiritual master in order to follow fully his or her instructions, and there is also much danger if the person claiming to be a master is not a real physician of the soul.

As already mentioned, one of the names of the disciple in Sufism is *murīd*, that is, one who wills. The master is also called *murād*, that is, the person who is the object of that will or *irādah*. The relation between the *murīd* and *murād* must be based on the complete surrender of the will of the *murīd* to the master, not as just another human being but as the representative of the Prophet and transmitter of the power of *walāyah/wilāyah*. Sufi authorities of old said that a disciple in the hands of the master should be like a cadaver in the hands of the washer of the dead. They also spoke of three stages of annihilation or extinction (*al-fanā'*), to which we shall turn shortly: *fanā'* in the *shaykh*, *fanā'* in the Prophet, *fanā'* in God. Without the surrender of one's will, trust, and love for the master, spiritual guidance is not possible.

The relation between a master and disciples concerns not only advice on technical spiritual matters dealing with practice of the methods of the path, given individually, but also discourse on the doctrine and general problems of the spiritual life, given often in the gathering of the disciples in a *majlis* and also more informal discourse (*suhbah*), through which disciples learn many concrete truths that concern both their inner and outer lives. There is also a relation between the master and the disciple in higher levels of reality manifested sometimes in veridical dreams, which provide important keys for the life of the soul on the subtle plane.

IMITATION OF THE PROPHET

The relation of the master to the disciple is modeled upon that of the Prophet to those companions who were close to him and to whom he imparted esoteric knowledge. This is one of the instances that reveals the importance for Sufism of the imitation of the Prophet and his *Sunnah*, which has been transmitted from generation to generation to us. For nearly two millennia Christians have spoken of *imitatio Christi*, and one of the great classics of Christian mysticism is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. The same is true for Islam in general and Sufism in particular. For Christians, Christ is considered to be divine, and certainly they do not claim to imitate his divinity or seek the power to raise the dead to life or walk on water. What they seek to emulate are his spiritual virtues, which stand out clearly since he did not participate in the ordinary affairs of human life and did not have to deal with certain human imperfections. In Islam the spiritual virtues of the Prophet are less evident from the outside since his role was to enter into the arena of ordinary life and sanctify it. Many Christians have in fact asked how one could emulate the Prophet spiritually since his life seems to have been so much mixed with being ruler of a human community, engaged in political and military activity, being concerned with family affairs, and so forth. For Muslims these activities serve as the model for the outer life while the Prophet's inner life, demonstrated in his frequent prayers and fasting and constant remembrance of God, serves as the model for the spiritual life.

The Prophet said, "Poverty is my pride," a saying that is similar to the words of Christ, who spoke of the blessedness of the poor. The Prophet realized poverty (*faqr*) in its deepest metaphysical sense,

which, as mentioned earlier, means to realize that all reality and all positive qualities belong to God and that in our basic nature we are the poor whereas He is the Rich, as a Quranic verse states explicitly. This spiritual poverty is so central to Sufism that Sufism is often called Muḥammadan poverty (*al-faqr al-muḥammadī*) and those who practice Sufism, *faqīr*, that is, possessors of *faqr*. In seeking to realize this fundamental and primordial state of *faqr*, all Sufis seek to emulate the Prophet.

In the same way that no Christian can possess a virtue not possessed on the highest level by Christ, no Muslim, even the greatest saints and sages, can possess any virtue not possessed in its perfection by the Prophet, who for Muslims is the Perfect or Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in whom all possibilities of cosmic existence are realized. For Muslims he is the perfect mirror reflecting all of God's Names and Qualities, and his inner reality, called the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah*), is identified with the Logos. He is the most perfect of human beings and hence the most perfect human model to be imitated. When Sufis think of the spiritual reality of the Prophet, they think of the sacred saying in which God addresses the Prophet in the following words: "If thou wert not, I would not have created the heavens." They also remember always the name of the Prophet, *ḥabīb*, which means both he who loves God and he who is the beloved of God. The Prophet is the supreme guide to the love and knowledge of God and to the realization of the ever-present link between human beings and Him. As already mentioned, no one can love God who does not love His Prophet. That is why among prayers and supplications performed by Sufis, much is devoted to the praise of the Prophet, as are many of the masterpieces of Sufi poetry.

The emulation of the spiritual reality of the Prophet is also closely related to his Nocturnal Ascent (*al-mi'raj*), which took place shortly before his migration to Medina. According to tradition, this spiritual journey started in Mecca, proceeded to Jerusalem, and then continued vertically from Jerusalem through the heavens and higher levels of existence to the Divine Presence; the Prophet then returned to Jerusalem and finally to Mecca. Many Sufis have correlated the stations of the path with stages of the *mi'raj*, and some, like Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī, have described their own *mi'raj* to the Divine in their sayings and writings. The description of Bāyazīd's *mi'raj* based on his words has been recorded in many standard hagiographic Sufi works. In a sense the spiritual imita-

tion of the Prophet in Sufism can be summarized in the attempt of Sufis to go on *mi'rāj*, also following in his footsteps but realizing that their *mi'rāj* is only spiritual while that of the Prophet was also bodily.

Of course, all the great prophets and other manifestations of the Logos are pinnacles of perfection of the human state and possess all the basic spiritual virtues. The emphasis, however, differs from one prophet to another. As far as Islam is concerned, the virtues are associated with the very substance of the being of the Prophet, and it is the content of this substance that is crystallized into the various virtues described in classical Sufi texts. This spiritual substance is impregnated by spiritual power and esoteric knowledge stretching to the highest level of Reality and is determined by the two poles of truth and heart, which are therefore so central to Sufism, these two poles being also openness to transcendence and immanence. The path consists ultimately of putting the Truth in one's heart and knowing the Truth through the heart/intellect or what the Sufis call the "eye of the heart."

The Muḥammadan Reality is also, esoterically speaking, a model of the cosmos, and as Frithjof Schuon has said, the Muḥammadan Substance possesses a quaternary cluster of virtues corresponding to the four cardinal points of space. These clusters of qualities or virtues are purity, which is related to serenity and resignation; strength, related to fervor and vigilance; beauty, related to recollection and gratitude; and goodness and love, related to certitude and generosity.⁶ The Prophet had a purity of soul that enabled him to be serene, standing above the din of the world and resigned to the Will of God even during the many excruciating trials that he faced in his life. He had inner strength, which was related to the great fervor of his faith in God combined with being awake, free from the daydreaming of ordinary men and women, and always vigilant. The Prophet was beautiful both outwardly and inwardly, and even his simple life, combined with relative poverty even when he was the ruler of a whole cosmic sector, was combined with beauty. And this love of beauty brought with it remembrance of God, one of whose Names as mentioned already is the Beautiful, and gratitude for all the beauty and goodness that surrounded him and that was given by God. Finally the Prophet was full of goodness and love for both God and His creatures, and these virtues were closely tied to certitude in the nature of Truth as summarized in the first testimony of faith, "There is no god but God," with all its metaphysical and cosmological meanings. These virtues were also closely related to the

generosity and nobility that characterized the Prophet's life, for he was always strict with himself and generous and noble toward others. That is why in the Quran God addresses the Prophet, "And verily thou art of a super eminent character" (Quran 68:4), meaning that the Prophet had the deepest receptivity for the highest truths.

The Quran also states, "Verily in the Messenger of God you have a good model" (Quran 33:21), adding that he is the example and model for those who look to God and accept the Day of Judgment and remember and invoke God (*dhikr Allāh*) often. Although all pious Muslims seek to follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, it is especially the Sufis who have taken the lesson of this verse to heart. Since they are those who remember or invoke often, they believe that this verse is especially addressed to them. They seek to follow, however, not only the outer *Sunnah* but also the inner *Sunnah* related to the spiritual substance of the Prophet. They therefore seek to cultivate within their souls the Prophetic virtues. In fact, the famous Sufi classical treatments of the virtues are no more than expansions and elucidations of the basic virtues mentioned above. They are descriptions of states and stations traversed by the Prophet but systematized for those who aspire to march upon the path to the Garden of Truth.

STATES AND STATIONS

Classical texts of Sufism distinguish between a state (*ḥāl*) and a station (*maqām*) in the spiritual journey, and before turning to the main steps of the ladder to the Garden, it is important to understand this distinction. A state is a spiritual condition that is transient, descends suddenly upon a *faqīr*, and leaves him or her with the same suddenness. While practicing the disciplines of the path, one may suddenly experience an expansion (*bast*), which brings with it indescribable elation or joy, or one may experience a contraction (*qabḍ*), as if God had forsaken that person. A disciple may experience fear or hope, the joy of union or the sorrow of separation, a desert or a garden. His or her duty is to continue the spiritual practice through all these states, including ones in which he or she has a powerful experience of overwhelming love or inebriating beauty.

Even ordinary people have once in a while an inner experience that is like the *ḥāl* of the Sufis. In the face of great tragedy or a great work of art including music, for a moment the walls of the ego seem

to crumble and one can experience a spiritual state associated with awe or sorrow, joy or expansion. Usually such rare experiences in the life of ordinary people remain only as a memory, but for some it is the occasion for turning the direction of the movement of their life toward God rather than away from Him. For the practitioner of Sufism such experiences usually occur more often and affect the spiritual life more directly. For example, for those who have an ear for sacred and traditional music but who do not practice the disciplines of the path, hearing such music can put them in a *ḥāl*, which terminates, however, when the music comes to an end. For the *faqīr*, such music associated with *samāʿ* is like a wind current that helps the wings of the soul to fly higher toward the Empyrean, and its effect on the soul persists after the music itself is terminated. In any case, spiritual states are an important element of spiritual wayfaring and aid the soul on its journey, provided a person does not become fixated by a *ḥāl* and continues to remember that the goal of the path is not the experience of this or that phenomenon, even if it be of a spiritual nature, but of God. Many who have experienced a transient or even permanent spiritual state and have ceased to continue on the path have gained various psychic powers and even visions of the intermediate world but have failed to reach the One who is the goal of the path.

In contrast to states, stations (*maqāmāt*, plural of *maqām*) are permanent. They are like various plateaus that one reaches during mountain climbing, where one can rest on the way to the summit, but of course one should continue to struggle to reach the top. The reaching of a station implies a high degree of spiritual attainment. It is the fruit of a great exertion (*jihād*) within the soul to overcome its infirmities combined with grace. When someone in a Sufi order is called “the possessor of a station,” it means that he or she has reached a high level of spiritual realization. The stations, sometimes also called by certain Sufis places of descent (*manāzil*) and halting places or spiritual stayings (*mawāqif*, which concern especially the end of various stations), are usually identified with spiritual virtues, the attainment of each of which marks a station on the path.

THE VIRTUES

Sufi doctrine, like all truth, comes from God. What we bring to the path is our soul, which must become embellished with the virtues

in order to be worthy of entering the Garden of Truth. But even the virtues belong ultimately to God, who has made them available to us through the Prophet. Also from the practical and operative point of view the duty of the *faqīr* is to remove the vices that prevent the virtues from manifesting themselves in the soul. In order to gain the virtue of humility we must overcome the vice of pride, and in order to be embellished with the virtue of truthfulness we must stop being hypocrites and remove from ourselves the vice of deceitfulness. For the vast majority of members of Sufi orders, the spiritual life consists of the battle to become virtuous. Only a few are able to devote themselves to Sufi metaphysics, but from a more profound point of view each virtue is an aspect of the truth as reflected in the soul. Virtue as understood in Sufism is not simply moral virtue but rather spiritual virtue with a noetic and existential dimension. For example, humility is not simply the sentimental attitude of humbling our egos before God and the neighbor. It is the metaphysical awareness that before the Absolute we are nothing and that the neighbor is not incomplete in the same way as we are and that even in his or her incompleteness possesses existence, which comes from God and before which we must have an attitude of humility.

Classical Sufi texts are replete with the description of the virtues. I shall mention later some of the early Sufis, who wrote on this subject and whose writings culminate in al-Ghazzālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revivification of the Sciences of Religion*), the most important work of spiritual ethics in the history of Islam. Since the steps to God or the stations can be enumerated in different ways and seen from different perspectives, the number of stations and their ordering is not the same everywhere. Some speak of three main stations, some of seven, some of forty, and some of even higher numbers. In what follows I shall mention some of the main stations, whose understanding opens the door for the comprehension of this subject in general.

The three cardinal virtues of the Universal Man, or for Muslims the Muḥammadan Reality, which encompass the others and which are found in one way or another in every integral and authentic spiritual tradition, are humility, charity and nobility, and sincerity and truthfulness. From the Sufi perspective, each of these virtues is illuminated by the light of the intellect and is not only sentimental. Many people put on an air of humility to hide the pride of the ego; this is not humility but hypocrisy. It is also against intelligence and knowledge of the truth

not to admit one's superiority in a particular matter pertaining to the truth while remaining humble. If a person knows that the square root of nine is three and someone comes along and insists that it is two, it is not spiritual humility not to insist upon the truth that it is three because one fears being seen as proud. Much of theological truth has been destroyed in the modern world through the practice of sacrificing the truth at the altar of a sentimental and opaque humility. For example, many Christian theologians have refused to criticize what is theologically an error because of false humility often combined with a sense of compassion that remains impervious to the truth, with the result that it is no longer fashionable today to speak of theological heresy or for that matter truth as such. In all authentic spirituality, however, the demand of the truth is the highest demand upon us.

Likewise, charity is not simply a sentimental giving on the basis of wanting to feel good. In order for charity to be spiritually efficacious, it must be based on the metaphysical awareness that the other is in the deepest sense ourselves and that in giving we also overcome the walls of our own ego, which separates us from others, and consequently we also receive. This virtue is of course related to love and compassion, which, as mentioned earlier, run through the arteries of the universe. We must first love God, who is the source of all compassion, in order for our acts of charity to have a positive spiritual effect upon us. As for nobility, it is closely related to the virtue of charity. To be noble is to give of oneself, and it places great responsibilities on our shoulders. As the French proverb asserts, "*noblesse oblige*," that is, nobility places obligations upon us. We have an obligation to be charitable and compassionate in order to realize our own nobility, which might be hidden under a heavy crust of selfishness.

The virtue of truth is, in this scheme, the crowning virtue. It is like the apex of a triangle whose other angles are humility and charity; the attainment of truth in fact requires both of these other virtues. Furthermore, truthfulness is inseparable from sincerity. Truthfulness means first of all halting in complete surrender before the Truth. It means also to see the truth of things, to be honest in thought and deed, to be sincere, and to remain always on the side of the truth no matter what consequences it might have for us. There is no higher virtue for in being truthful we confirm most clearly our theomorphic nature since God is the Truth. In attaining fully this virtue we become ready to enter the Garden of Truth.

These three sets of cardinal virtues of humility, charity and nobility, and sincerity and truthfulness are the ornaments of the soul of the Prophet, as are the quaternary sets of virtues discussed above. Moreover, inasmuch as he is the supreme exemplar of the Perfect or Universal Man, he is the perfect mirror reflecting the virtues, which, as mentioned, belong on their highest level to God. These three sets of virtues correspond to the phases of contraction, expansion, and union, which are to be found universally in all integral mystical traditions, including the Christian. Within the soul of the person in quest of reaching God, something must shrivel and die. In the next phase what remains in the soul must expand to fit the mold of the Universal Man or, more specifically for Muslims, the Prophet in his inner reality.

Only then can one speak of the possibility of union, which in Sufism does not mean the union of the creature and the Creator or the servant and the Lord. As a Sufi poem states, "How can this dust be united with the world of purity?" Union means our becoming aware of our nothingness before God, becoming a perfectly polished mirror that has nothing of its own but reflects what is put before it. In the case of human beings, it is the totality of Divine Names and Qualities that are reflected in the mirror of our inner being. It is not our individual ego but the divine spark within that unites with the Divinity. Henceforth, as already stated, God becomes the eye with which we see, and we become the eye with which God sees. Nay, we realize that God is the Light with which we see all things. That is why it is not possible to see God simply as object in the ordinary sense although He is both the Supreme Object and the Supreme Subject. To use classical Sufi terminology, in the state of union the servant remains the servant and the Lord the Lord, while the divine spark within, the immanent intellect, achieves union with the Divine Self, from which it issues directly. Furthermore, union does not mean the destruction of the positive aspects of the self but its absorption into the highest Reality. We are able to swim in the ocean of Divinity, to quote Meister Eckhart, in a state of fusion without confusion.

Some Sufi metaphysicians and Shi'ite gnostics such as Mullā Ṣadrā have spoken of four stages in the journey of the soul. It is of interest to mention them here in conjunction with the discussion of union. There is first of all the basic distinction between the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) and creation (*al-khalq*), of which we are a part. The first stage of the spiritual journey is from *al-khalq* to *al-Ḥaqq*, and the stations corresponding to the cardinal spiritual virtues crowned by annihilation or extinction (*al-*

fanā') in God deal with this part of the journey. The second journey involves traveling in *al-Ḥaqq*. Subsistence in God (*al-baqā'*) concerns this phase. Certain Sufis such as Bāyazīd Bastāmī spoke openly of journeying in God. The third stage is a return from *al-Ḥaqq* to *al-khalq*, but with *al-Ḥaqq*. The fourth stage is the journey in *al-khalq* with *al-Ḥaqq*. The supreme example of the last two in Islam is the return to earth of the Prophet from his Nocturnal Ascent to the Divine Presence and his subsequent carrying out of the Prophetic mission. Or in a somewhat different context it is the Buddha delaying entry into nirvana in order to guide and save other beings. The last two stages of this journey are meant for prophets and great saints given the mission to establish or renew sacred institutions and structures for the guidance of human beings. Very few Sufis throughout Islamic history have claimed to have completed the third and fourth stages. As for those who claimed to have done so without actually journeying through the third and fourth stages, they have often performed the most dangerous acts and caused the destruction rather than establishment of sacred institutions for they have thought that their will was the Will of God without it being so. How many ravages have been brought upon human societies by those convinced that their will is God's Will? We have all seen examples of it in history, from those who burned Joan of Arc or so-called witches at the stake to Oliver Cromwell to some present-day Muslim extremists.

Technically speaking, Sufism is concerned on the practical level with only the first two stages because once a person reaches God, He will decide what the person is to do the rest of his or her life. If the four stages of the journey are mentioned in certain later works of Sufi metaphysics, it is in order to complete the description of all possibilities open to human beings including prophets. They want to provide an intellectual vision that embraces not only the stages of the perfection of the disciple in traveling from *al-khalq* to *al-Ḥaqq*, but also the descending of Moses from Mt. Sinai to accomplish the Will of God for his people as well as the prophetic missions of Christ and the Prophet.

As already mentioned, classical Sufi texts elaborated and systematized the discussion of the virtues in such a way as to be a practical guide for the followers of the path. One can see such treatments in the famous Sufi manuals of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān Hujwīrī, 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī, Ibn al-'Arīf, of course al-Ghazzālī, and many others. Each of them treated the stations and the virtues in a somewhat different manner in light of

his vision of what was needed by disciples, for surely the goal of these masters was not to simply describe the nature of the wine of gnosis but to make it possible to actually taste that pure wine. What follows is a synthesis of the teachings of these classical texts.

Many classical sources speak of seven virtues related to seven stations of the path. A great many Sufis have sung over the centuries the poem attributed to Rūmī:

‘Attār [the great Persian Sufi poet and saint] has traversed the
seven cities of Love,
We are still stuck at the turn of one street!

The cities of love are none other than the stations associated with virtues, to which we now turn.

All spiritual journeys for fallen humanity must begin with contrition (*inābah*) and repentance (*tawbah*) because the soul in its ordinary state is exteriorized with its back to the world of the Spirit and its face toward the external material world characterized by multiplicity, dispersion, ephemerality, corruption, and death. *Tawbah* is Arabic meaning literally “turning around.” We must change the direction of our souls, turn around and face the Divine Reality with our backs to the world. There are men and women who repent and then go back to their old ways and repent again. Although God does not like such a pattern in the life of a person determined to follow the path leading to Him, He is also aware of human weaknesses and is forgiving. The great master Rūmī had the following poem engraved on his mausoleum:

Come back, come back,
even if you have broken your repentance a thousand times.⁷

But those who wish to progress upon the path must make this turn-about permanent. They must continue to move toward the spiritual world with their faces turned to that world and their backs to this world. Turning one’s back to this world means overcoming the vice of the soul’s attachment to the multiplicity that surrounds it externally, and therefore the practice of the virtues of detachment, mindfulness, piety, chasteness, and scrupulousness in matters of religion. It means

asceticism in the inward and spiritual sense. That is why this station is called *zuhd* or *wara'*, the first referring to asceticism and the second to detachment and piety. Many of the early Sufis were ascetics, and some have therefore identified Sufism with asceticism, but the later masters made sure to preserve the distinction between the two. As Ḥāfiẓ says in one of his celebrated *ghazals*:

Criticize not the sagacious Sufis, O ascetic of pure nature,
For the sins of others will not be accounted against thee.⁸

But in order to advance to higher stations it is necessary to possess the ascetic virtues. It was from the ground of asceticism and fear of God prepared by the early Mesopotamian Sufis that the trees of Sufi love and gnosis grew in later centuries. Likewise, in the case of individuals it is necessary to gain the virtues associated with the station of *zuhd* and *wara'* in order to be able to drink the wine of Divine Love and to bathe in the light of illuminative knowledge.

The mastery of the state of asceticism and God-fearing piety leads to absolute surrender to God and reliance upon and trust in Him (*tawakkul*). A real traveler upon the path relies upon God under all conditions in both joy and sorrow, ease and difficulty. This is a station hard to reach for it is the habit of the soul to rely on itself or external forces and causes as if they were independent realities. There is also the danger that travelers will mistake this utter dependence upon God for lack of need of effort on their own part. Once a Bedouin came to see the Prophet and left his camel untethered outside. When the Prophet asked him why he did so, he answered that he relied upon God. The Prophet told him to first tether his camel and then have trust and reliance in God. Rūmī recounts this *ḥadīth* in the verse, "Tie the knee of the camel with *tawakkul*." Many Sufi masters were careful in making this point clear when they spoke of this station, as we see in the writings of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī and al-Ghazzālī. Sufis identified *tawakkul* with faith and in the case of Dhū'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī with certitude, and they emphasized the importance of human efforts in the attainment of this state.

Furthermore, *tawakkul* must be combined with the virtue of patience (*al-ṣabr*), for how can we rely on God with all our being without patience in confronting the tribulations and obstacles of life and even in attaining our basic physical needs? This station is reached by one

who is both patient and trustful, realizing that while we must exert our efforts to the best of our abilities, everything occurs in its due time according to God's Will and also according to a wisdom that is often beyond our ken. The Gospels say that with God all things are possible, but they do not say when.

To have complete trust in God is to live in peace and be happy, content, and satisfied (*al-riḍā*). Everyone wants to be content, to be satisfied with life, but the very flow of earthly life and the fluid nature of the soul make remaining in this state well nigh impossible as long as we base our contentment on external factors in a transient and uncertain world. Contentment is a high spiritual station attainable only if one is able to repose in the Divine Reality and be satisfied with such a condition. Such a person is also one with whom God is satisfied, and this person is ready to enter Paradise. As the Quranic verse states, "O thou soul which art at peace, return unto thy Lord with gladness that is thine in Him and His in thee. Enter thou among My Slaves; enter thou My Paradise" (Quran 89:27-30).⁹ This gladness is precisely *al-riḍā*. It is only in this station that the soul experiences the joy of contentment and the peace that, as Christ says, "passeth all understanding." This contentment also brings with it gratitude (*al-shukr*), for having been given such a condition of the soul that one is totally content with what God has given requires being thankful. In this state of contentment the soul can ask for nothing more.

We have already discussed spiritual poverty (*al-faqr*), which characterizes all of Sufism. But some masters have considered it as a station, sometimes mentioned before contentment and sometimes after. One has to realize fully the truth of the Quranic verse that God is the Rich and we are the poor, that ontologically He is Absolute Being while we are nothing in ourselves, having received our existence from Him. From one point of view one has to have achieved the station of *faqr* in order to reach the station of contentment. From another one must travel through all the aforementioned stations to realize the deepest meaning of *faqr*. In any case, *faqr* is the gate to both Divine Love and Divine Knowledge.

In order to be able to attain the highest stations one has to have sincerity (*al-ikhlas*), avoiding all hypocrisy and impurity of character. One can reach the Truth only by being completely sincere and of pure intention. There are some hidden corners of the soul that are not easy to reach and only under certain circumstance reveal their distorted na-

ture and bring out a person's hypocrisy. This trait is considered one of the great dangers of the path. To confront this hidden hypocrisy certain Sufis went in the other direction of hiding their virtues and performed acts that were considered externally as blameworthy. Hence they were called the People of Blame (*al-malāmatiyyah* or *malāmiyyah*).

There are many stories about the People of Blame in Sufi literature. For example, it is recounted that one of the *malāmātī* Sufis decided to lie down in front of a mosque with his eyes closed at the time of the Friday congregational prayers when everyone was going into the mosque. A self-righteous merchant kicked the apparently sleeping Sufi as he entered and severely scolded him for not getting up and going to the prayers. The Sufi opened his eyes but said nothing and seemed to go back to sleep. An hour later when the prayers were finished, the merchant came out, whereupon the Sufi opened his eyes and said to him, "While you were outwardly standing in the line of worshippers and making the various movements of the prayers, inwardly your thoughts were completely engrossed in your business affairs and not concerned with God at all, whereas although I was lying down here with my eyes closed, I was thinking only of God." The merchant, having his thoughts during the prayers thus recounted to him by the apparently lowly dervish sleeping at the gate of the mosque, was filled with remorse and was cured of his self-righteous hypocrisy. The People of Blame were indeed an antidote to hypocrisy and the tendency of some people in a strongly religious ambience to falsely display great piety and even assume the traits of certain exalted stations, including reception of theophanies of Divine Names, without in reality possessing these traits. Ibn 'Arabī calls the People of Blame perfect gnostics. The relation between the virtue of sincerity and gaining access to the Truth is brought out in the Quran, where *Sūrah* 112, which deals with Pure Truth and summarizes the Islamic doctrine of Divine Unity (*al-tawḥīd*), is known as both "Sincerity" and "Unity."

The stations described thus far lead finally to the highest stations, which are those of love (*al-maḥabbah*) and unitive knowledge or gnosis (*al-ma'rifah*). We have dealt with both of these subjects already and need not return to them here except to mention that classical Sufi texts deal with levels of both love and knowledge when they are considered as stations of the path. And needless to say, these are crowning virtues and the highest stations because they concern the love and knowledge of God as well as knowledge by God of us and His love for his servants.

The virtues and stations have also been envisaged in other ways. What I have presented here is a synthesis of many classical works and, even more important, the actual stations that the soul must experience in order to become worthy of the supreme goal of the path of ascent, considered by the Sufis to be extinction or annihilation (*al-fanā'*) and subsistence (*al-baqā'*). These stations also pertain to levels of existence beyond the ordinary and are concerned with stages of our ultimate return to our Divine Origin.

Paradoxically, the greatest gift that has been given to us is the possibility of realizing our own nothingness. The process of cosmogenesis has brought forth and bestowed existence upon all things from the Origin, which is Absolute Being. In the cosmos there is generation and corruption, but only God can bring being out of nonbeing and turn being into nonbeing. Usually when we say that this or that object has become extinct or annihilated we are using these terms only metaphorically, if we consider the existence as well as the form of things. Annihilation comes from the root *nihil*, or nothingness, and we cannot turn any existing thing outside ourselves into literally nothing as far as the existence (and not only form) of that thing is concerned. We can “annihilate” a building but are not able to turn its material into nothingness. Even in contemporary physics, matter can be turned into energy and vice versa but not turned into nothing. Physicists do speak of black holes or antimatter, but the understanding of such objects is based on their accidents and mathematical characteristics, not on their existence and ontological reality in the philosophical sense, for in most of modern physics there is no interest in ontology. The handful of physicists who have a metaphysical perspective do, however, speak of a subtle “field” that fills the whole universe, even where there seems to be emptiness. Some have called this the *Akashic* field, using a term drawn from Hindu cosmology. The transformations associated with annihilation that occur in the material world are really integration and absorption into this subtle field and not annihilation in the ontological sense. Only God can reverse the effect of His Command, “Be!”

And yet in a universe in which each existent, from the dust to the archangel, occupies its own distinct state of being, from which it cannot transgress, God Himself has allowed human beings to undo the cosmogonic process and realize their own nonexistence before the Truth, which alone is, giving their existence back to its Origin. Through the threshold of what the Sufis call annihilation or extinction (*al-fanā'*),

humanity is able to enter the Garden of Truth and to subsist in God (*baqā'*). The absolutely necessary condition for entering remains the realization that in ourselves we are nonexistent and that all being belongs to God. The Khurāsānī Sufi Kharaqānī said, "A true Sufi is he who is not." It was in this state that Rūmī sang:

We are non-existence appearing as existence,
Thou art Absolute Being appearing as the perishable.¹⁰

As human beings, we have the ability to reach the state of extinction and annihilation and yet have the consciousness that we are nothing in ourselves and that all being belongs to God. We can reach a state of unitive consciousness prior to bifurcation into object and subject. To reach such a state involves, according to certain Sufis, the three stages mentioned already: annihilation in the spiritual master, who represents the Prophet; annihilation in the Prophet, whom God has addressed directly; and finally annihilation in God. Also in the Divine Order there are again three stages, that is, annihilation in God's Acts, in His Names and Qualities, and finally in His Essence.

That supreme level implies the annihilation of annihilation (*fanā' al-fanā'*), which is also called subsistence (*al-baqā'*) in God. That is the state that would be called in English spiritual union, although Sufism usually uses other terms. This state also corresponds to what certain Oriental religious doctrines call the Supreme Identity. In this state one swims in the ocean of Divinity and Unity and could assert with Ḥallāj:

He am I whom I love, He whom I love is I,
Two Spirits in one single body dwelling.
So seest thou me, then seest thou Him.
And seest thou Him, then seest thou Us.¹¹

No one reaches God without going through the gate of *al-fanā'* and realizing the truth that in ourselves we are nothing, ontologically speaking, and that God alone is Reality as such. It is through *al-fanā'* that human beings gain the "Truth of Certainty" (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*). The person in whom such a truth has become all-pervasive is called *muḥaqqiq* literally, the person in whom Truth has become realized; this person

has become embellished with the Qualities of God, realizing fully the order of the Prophet given in the *ḥadīth*, “Qualify yourself with the Qualities of God” (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq’Llāh*). Such masters as Ibn ‘Arabī consider the *muḥaqqiq* to possess the highest rank among Sufis. A person who has realized subsistence in God is worthy of becoming an inhabitant of the Garden of Essence, or *Riḍwān*, which stands at the center of the Garden of Truth and which is identified with the Gardener, the Supreme Reality, that is also the Self of ourselves, residing at the center of our being.

“There” is also “here” because Reality is at once transcendent and immanent. The practices of Sufism that have been outlined in this chapter take us from the ordinary consciousness and level of being through the cosmic mountain and the heavens to the very Divine Presence, but this process also is an even deeper penetration into the center of our own being, into the heart, where the Divine Reality also resides. The spiritually realized person is aware that to be really “here” is also to be “there” and to be “there” is to be really “here.” The Garden is at once beyond us and within us. Furthermore, when the heart of a traveler upon the path has been opened to God through moral and spiritual discipline, spiritual practice, the acquisition of virtues, and the grace of Heaven, or what the Sufis call Divine Confirmation (*ta’yīd*), that heart *is* in its inner reality the Garden. As a contemporary sage and Sufi master has said:

*Das Herz will heilig werden
Und steht vor Gottes Tür.
Ist Paradies auf Erden
Dann ist hier, ja hier.*

The heart wants to be holy
And stands before God’s gate.
If there is a Paradise on earth
It is here, yea, here.¹²