

**Uncovering the Secrets of Consciousness:
The Sufi Approach**

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In Memoriam

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**In Memoriam:
Celebrating the Lifelong Contributions of a Dedicated NELC Colleague at IU-B**

Universities as educational establishments devoted to the production and dissemination of knowledge, if and when aiming to carry these heavy responsibilities conscientiously, contribute to the real and permanent good in this world, and are the true philanthropic institutions-- the *sadaqah jariyah*. Small numbers of teachers and researchers in these learned institutions manage to leave powerful legacies of scholarship through their publications and, more importantly, a *silsilah* of accomplished pupils. Even smaller numbers succeed in leaving behind the most eternal and valued of societal capital: a personal reputation, a good name. As Shaykh Muslihuddin Sa'di of Shiraz has so sagaciously said:

Sa'diya mardi nekunaam Namirad hargiz

Murda aanast ke naamash ba neku-i nabarand

(Oh Sa'di, a person of good name shall never die;

Dead are those who's names are not uttered for good deeds!)

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC) at Indiana University, during its short history of about half a century, often faced with considerable challenges, was blessed by the leadership and services of some remarkably dedicated scholars, teachers, mentors and leaders such as Professor Victor Danner (Professor and Chairman of NELC, as well as Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program). This scholar of Islam and Middle Eastern history was the pioneers of his fields at Indiana University. NELC owes much to him for his many contributions.

Not long ago we left behind a period of administrative chaos, which briefly even threatened the very existence of NELC as an academic unit on our campus (1999-2000). We are however very pleased to have regained our academic strength and administrative credibility, and are determined evermore to keep NELC as an important part of IU's mission for promoting international education in the United States. We are especially pleased to be able to celebrate the accomplishments of our former colleague through the annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies. The inaugural lecture was presented during the academic year 2002-2003, and was published in the first issue of *In Memoriam*

(2002).

The Memorial Lecture in this volume delivered by Professor William Chittick in 2007 was made possible with the generous support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (COAS) of Indiana University, members Danner families, their close relatives, students and friends around the world. We are grateful for their support.

It is our hope that these lectures will continue for decades to come and with your generous help future generations will continue to benefit from the latest social sciences and humanities research and analysis on the Middle East. Indeed, we have established the Danner Memorial Lecture Funds administered by the Indiana University Foundation to insure future funding for these important memorial lectures.

Dr. Mary Ann Danner-Fadae and Dr. Zaineb Istrabadi were instrumental in establishing the Victor Danner Memorial Lecture Fund. We are also grateful to Mary Ann for persuading Professor Huston Smith to present the inaugural Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies. We were very fortunate and most grateful to have Professor Huston Smith, a widely admired scholar and a most generous spirit to help us launch this lecture series in Islamic Studies. Dr. Zaineb Istrabadi, one of Professor Danner's accomplished students and a member of our faculty remembered her mentor fondly, and many from the Bloomington community and beyond joined us in this celebration. We offer our warmest thanks to all for their assistance in these endeavors.

It is my hope that through the publication of these lectures, we are able to perpetuate the legacies of great teachers, true scholars and inspired guides. Indeed, it is the hope of immortalizing the memories of such exemplary colleagues and their good name and reputation that, with your generous help, we will be able to undertake presenting these Memorial Lectures for years to come.

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Professor Victor Danner was born on October 22, 1926, in Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico to Arthur James and Maria Lopez Danner. As a young man, he served his country during WWII. After the war he attended Georgetown University where he received his B.A. *magna cum laude* in 1957. Later that year he traveled to Morocco to become an instructor and eventually Director of the American Language Center, sponsored by the US Information Service. While there he took advantage of the opportunity not only to get acquainted with the country but also to perfect his knowledge of classical Arabic texts.



In 1964, Professor Danner returned to the US for his doctoral studies and graduated from Harvard in 1970. He came to IU in 1967 and was a professor of Arabic and Religious Studies at Indiana University until his death in 1990. He served as Chairman of the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department for five years, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Middle Eastern Studies Program.

He was an internationally renowned scholar in the fields of Islamic mysticism, comparative religion, and classical Arabic literature. In 1976, he was invited to speak at the international World Festival of Islam in London. Professor Danner was also active in a number of professional organizations, including the Washington D.C.-based Foundation for Traditional Studies, for which he served as Secretary-Treasurer. He wrote *Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah’s Sufi Aphorisms* (1973); *Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah: The Book of Wisdom*, (1978); and *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction* (1988), in addition to over twenty-five articles and reviews.

One of his students, Lauri King Irani, captured his essence: “As a teacher, Victor Danner had few equals. He taught Arabic, classical Arabic literature, Islam, Sufism, the Qur’an, comparative religion, comparative mysticism, and Eastern religions. His dignified bearing, elegant gestures, and verbal eloquence transformed his lectures into performances which had the power to captivate and inspire his students, whether he was discussing Arabic grammar or Islamic theology. His concern for and encouragement of his students, coupled with his understated sense of humor, earned him a well-deserved reputation as a caring and committed educator who taught not only when behind the classroom lectern, but also by example.”

He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end.

-from the *Sufi Aphorisms* by Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah (d.1309)
Translated by Victor Danner



Born and raised in Milford, Connecticut, William C. Chittick completed his B.A. in history at the College of Wooster (Ohio) and then went to Iran, where he completed a Ph.D. in Persian literature at Tehran University in 1974. He taught comparative religion in the humanities department at Aryamehr Technical University in Tehran and returned to the United States in January 1979. For three years he was assistant editor at the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Columbia University), and since 1983 he has taught religious studies at Stony Brook.

Chittick is author and translator of twenty-five books and one hundred articles on Islamic thought, Sufism, Shi'ism, and Persian literature. His more recent books include *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (State University of New York Press, 1998), *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (One World, 2000), *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2001), *The Elixir of the Gnostics* (Brigham Young University Press, 2003), and *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (FonsVitae, 2004). He is currently working on several research projects in Sufism and Islamic philosophy.

Uncovering the Secrets of Consciousness:

The Sufi Approach

I chose to speak about consciousness in a lecture dedicated to the memory of my friend Victor Danner for a number of reasons. The first is that I recently edited a volume called *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition*, based on thirty years of Parabola magazine, and it includes two wonderful essays by Professor Danner, one of which is called “Intoxication and Sobriety,” and the other “Witnessing.” The latter talks a great deal about consciousness, and it inspired me to think about how I would deal with the same issue.

A second reason I chose the topic was that people seem to be paying a great deal of attention to it these days, not only in popular magazines, but also in universities. In fact I borrowed my title from a recent Provost’s Lecture at Stony Brook, a lecture that was not untypical of what our provost has been sponsoring over the past few years. This one was called “How the Brain Decides: Uncovering the Secrets of Cognition.” I thought that I could also try my hand at such secrets, not least because so many people talk of Sufism as “Islamic mysticism,” and mysticism is frequently described as the quest to know the mysteries.

This is not to say, however, that I think mysticism is necessarily a good designation for what can fit under the umbrella term “Sufism” in Islamic civilization, given that mysticism has negative and antirational connotations.

Sufism seems to be a better term to designate the general tendency among Muslims to strive for a personal engagement with the Divine Reality. This tendency has been found from the beginning of the religion and, over Islamic history, has given rise to a proliferation of individuals, movements, and institutions. What they all share is the notion that religion exists for the sake of bringing about nearness to God, and that one should strive to achieve that nearness here and now. Because of this concern, Sufis have a very different focus in their teachings and activities from Muslims who think that the most important part of Islam is practical and legal instruction, or that the most important part is dogma. In other words, it is usually possible, though not always so, to distinguish scholars of Sufism from jurists and theologians.

As for “consciousness,” I will not try to define it. Offering a definition would be too much like asking vision to see itself. I will simply assume that all of us are indeed conscious beings.

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The first problem we have in talking about consciousness in Sufism is to come up with appropriate terminology. There is no single word in Islamic languages that can act as a synonym, though there are many terms that overlap with the various meanings that are given to the term in English. I want to run through a few of these words and summarize how they are used in Sufi texts, though I will also have occasion to refer to parallel discussions in the philosophy (*falsafa*).

Before beginning, however, I think it is important to remind you that discussing consciousness in Islamic terms will necessarily be radically different from the sort of discussion we get from neuro-biologists and cognitive scientists. Those of us who were born in the modern West and have had the scientific worldview inculcated into us from infancy generally feel comfortable with talking about “consciousness” as something to be studied and investigated, much as we might study microorganisms or the workings of the brain. This modern approach assumes that the subject doing the research can also be the object of study. But this assumption does not make much sense in premodern worldviews, which were not nearly as inclined as we are to make a sharp distinction between subject and object.

If we want to understand the Islamic way of explaining the nature of consciousness, we need to keep in mind that all of Islamic thought is rooted in the notion of a unique Principle, a Supreme Reality that gives rise to all things, consciousness included. In this ultimate Reality itself, no distinctions of any sort can be drawn, certainly not between subject and object, or consciousness and existence. The Hindu tradition, specifically the Upanishads, is especially well known for its parallel discussion, that is, the identification of Brahman with Atman, that is, the Supreme Reality with the Supreme Self. For Hinduism, life, consciousness, awareness, and joy are infinitely present in the One Source of all, which is *sat-chit-ananda*, being-consciousness-bliss. The universe and everything it contains can be nothing but that Reality’s “names and forms” (*nama-rupa*).

This Islamic and Hindu understanding of the source of consciousness could hardly be more different from the worldview that we grow up with in the West, which strips existence, and indeed reality itself, of all that is qualitative, good, beautiful, and conscious, and treats these qualities as epiphenomena that can be reduced to physical and biological substrata accessible to the scientific method. In the Islamic context, no philosopher, theologian, or scientist could have imagined that the underlying stuff of reality is an amorphous matter/energy waiting for cosmic accidents to occur and eventually giving rise to life and awareness without rhyme or reason. Rather, existence and consciousness, reality and awareness, beauty and joy, are always and forever present and permeate all that exists, whether or not we ourselves happen to be aware of this fact.

The Conscious Self

The Islamic worldview is built on the acknowledgement that most of reality escapes everyday perception. What we experience through our senses is simply the reification or sedimentation of deeper or higher strata of reality. But this invisible realm is not that of modern physics, but rather that of life, awareness, and joy. The further we extend our awareness in the direction of that invisibility, the closer we get to the pure Being and Consciousness of the Supreme Reality, *sat-chit-ananda*.

We might refer to this invisible realm as “subjective” in contrast to the “objectivity” of external things, but this terminology has no real precedents in pre-modern Islam, so it is better to try to use words that Muslim thinkers

actually employed. Generally, they spoke of the invisible something that is alive and aware, whether in plants, animals, humans, or angels, as *rūḥ* and *nafs*. *Rūḥ*, typically translated as “spirit” and cognate with Hebrew *ruwach*, derives from the same root as *rīḥ*, “wind” (Latin *spiritus*). *Nafs*, translated as “self” or “soul” and employed in Arabic as a reflexive pronoun, is written the same way as *nafas*, “breath,” and is of course cognate with Hebrew *nephesh*. *Nafs* plays a role in the conceptualization of the self and the universe analogous to that of both Sanskrit *prana* and Chinese *qi*.

Rūḥ and *nafs* are important Koranic terms and much discussed by Muslim scholars. Some consider them synonyms, and others prefer to distinguish between the two. Either can designate what we mean when we talk about the awareness or consciousness of animals. Neither have any upper limits. Both refer to a perceived or presumed subjectivity, whether in animals, humans, or angels (the last of which are often defined simply as “spirits,” or “spirits blown into bodies of light”). Moreover, it is not unusual for Muslim scholars to speak of the “mineral spirit” (*rūḥ ma‘danī*) or the “vegetal spirit” (*rūḥ nabātī*), and the Koran speaks of God’s spirit as well as God’s *nafs*. Theologians spent a good deal of time trying to clarify what these terms can mean in relation to the Unique, Indivisible God.

A third word that is extremely important in discussions of human consciousness is *qalb*, “heart” (Persian *di*). The Koran makes this the locus of human awareness and intelligence. The heart is not—in contrast to modern usage—the source of emotions and sentiments, except in a secondary sense.

Feelings and opinions are rather what cloud and obscure the heart. In Koranic terms, the heart can become “blind,” or “rusty,” or “ill,” and the result is ignorance and forgetfulness, which in turn lead to disobedience and sin.

The Sufi tradition generally looks at the path of attaining nearness to God as that of purifying the heart. Rūmī and others refer to those who achieve the goal as “the folk of the heart” (*ahl-i di*). They have reached the station indicated by a purported *ḥadīth qudsī* (a saying of Muhammad that quotes the words of God) that is constantly quoted in Sufi texts: “My heavens and My earth do not embrace Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”¹

Sufi texts frequently discuss the *nafs* as having various levels of actualization. The early schemes generally focus on three ascending levels, using terms derived from the Koran. Other levels are often added, and it is not uncommon for authors to speak of seven levels; those who achieve the highest level are in constant communion with God.

When philosophers talk about *nafs*—soul or self—they typically tell us that it must be transformed from a state of potential knowing to actual knowing. Right now the soul has the potential to know all things, the possibility of becoming truly intelligent and truly conscious of the way things actually are. The goal of the quest for wisdom is for the self to be transmuted into an actual intellect. Here the word is *‘aql*. Such an actualized intellect is practically indistinguishable from the radiant light of the divine consciousness. Some Sufis use the same word *‘aql* to make similar points; it is especially

¹ For a good selection of texts on soul, spirit, heart, and the inner dynamics that are involved in achieving heart-consciousness, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), Chapters 8-10.

prominent in the poetry of Rumi, who distinguishes between the partial intellect of ordinary people and the universal intellect attained by prophets and saints, along with many intermediate degrees.

Several other terms are also used to talk about the knowing subject. It is sufficient to note that in each case, the human self is looked upon as capable of expanding in intelligence, consciousness, and awareness, and that there are no upper limits to its possibilities. This is why Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the human soul as “an ocean without shore,” as when he writes, “In the view of those who know the *nafs*, the *nafs* is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end.”²

Knowledge

Clearly one of the key Arabic terms in this discussion is *‘ilm*, “knowledge.” As a verbal noun, *‘ilm* designates the act of knowing, and in early Arabic it had no plural; later, it was used to designate a branch of knowledge, or a “science,” and at that point authors employ a plural form. Words derived from the same root tell us something of how *‘ilm* was conceptualized. *‘Alam* means impression, track, trace, landmark, banner; *‘alāma* means mark, sign, token by which something is known. Knowledge is thus connected etymologically with distinctions, signs, and marks. Most interesting is the word *‘ālam*, world or cosmos. The dictionaries explain that its literal sense is “that by means of which one knows,” or “that by means of which the Creator is known.” Ibn ‘Arabī is simply reminding us of the word’s etymology when he says, “We

² *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. 3, p. 121, line 25; cited in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 345.

mention the ‘cosmos’ [*‘ālam*] with this word to let it be known [*‘ilm*] that by it we mean that God has made the cosmos a ‘mark’ [*‘alāma*].”³

The word *‘ilm* can also mean the contents of one’s knowledge rather than the act of knowing. In this meaning it can be translated as “learning.” In Sufi writings it often designates rote and bookish learning as opposed to real understanding. Al-Ghazālī compares (d. 1111) the human being to a house with a courtyard, at the center of which is a pool, called the heart. When people fill up the pool by piping water in from the outside, that is learning. But when they dig deeply into their own hearts and make contact with the hidden source of water, that is true, unmediated knowing, which is nothing other than the divine light. This is the fully actualized intelligence and consciousness that Sufis and philosophers are trying to attain.

Direct, unmediated knowledge of the way things truly are, achieved when the water of awareness bubbles up from the depths of the heart, is often called *ma‘rifa*, a word that can also be used as a synonym for *‘ilm*, though it connotes recognizing rather than knowing. The secondary literature on Sufism often translates *ma‘rifa* as “gnosis.” Its active participle, *‘arif*, is commonly used to designate the “gnostics,” those who have achieved unmediated knowledge of the object of the quest.⁴ The most important *locus classicus* for the technical understanding of the word is probably the purported saying of the Prophet, “He who recognizes [*‘arafa*] his own self [*nafs*] recognizes his Lord.” In the present

³ *Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 473, line 33.

⁴ Avicenna has a section on the gnostics toward the end of his *al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*. It was translated—without sufficient attention to the Sufi grounding of much of the technical terminology—by Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996)

context, one could equally well translate this saying, “He who becomes truly conscious of himself becomes truly conscious of his Lord,” which is to say that those who attain real self-knowledge are conscious in and through the Divine Reality. As a scriptural basis for this sort of consciousness, Sufis often cite the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God says, “When I love My servant, I am the hearing through which he hears, the eyesight through which he sees, the foot with which he walks, and the hand through which he grasps.” He is also, of course, the heart through which the servant is conscious.⁵

The mention of love (*ḥubb*) in this hadith is highly significant. It helps explain the central importance that is generally given to love in Sufi writings, especially the works of the Sufi poets. Love is considered the motive force that brings about the oneness of lover and beloved, knower and known, subject and object. In the last analysis, man as lover of God turns out to have been God as lover of man, for man and God are lover and beloved of each other, and the culmination of their love is union. The Koran speaks of this mutual love in the often-quoted verse, “He loves them, and they love Him” (5:54). At the summit of realized love, no distinctions are to be drawn between lover and beloved, conscious subject and perceived object.

⁵ Taking as their starting point the complete text of this hadith as provided by authoritative sources (such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim), Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers discuss two basic sorts of nearness (*qurb*) to God, in one of which God is man’s faculties, and in the other of which man is God’s faculties; along the way they express many of the mysteries and paradoxes of the divine/human Form that can only be fully realized by prophets and saints. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 325-31.

The Unity of the Real

To put Sufi discussions of consciousness into a broader context, we need to have a clear sense of the underlying worldview, which is founded on the first Shahadah, the four words *lā ilāha illa'llāh*, “(There is) no god but God.” This sentence, commonly called *kalimat al-tawhīd*, “the statement that asserts (God’s) unity,” is the starting point of Muslim faith and practice. The two halves of the statement—“no god” and “but God”—are known as the negation (*naḥy*) and the affirmation (*ithbāt*). They point to two of the Shahadah’s basic senses. The first is the negation of all qualities designated by the divine names from “everything other than God” (*mā siwa'llāh*), which is another standard definition of the cosmos or universe. The second is the affirmation that all positive qualities of created things, to the extent that they are really present, can only belong to God.

In other words, the statement of *tawhīd* tells us that nothing deserves the name God but God himself, and nothing else is worthy of being called by the names by which God calls himself. All the qualities designated by the divine names—such as life, mercy, knowledge, power, justice, forgiveness—belong strictly to God. God alone is “Real” (*al-ḥaqq*), to use the Koranic term; or, he alone is Being (*wujūd*), to use the more philosophical expression. It follows that everything other than God, in and of itself, is “unreal” (*bāṭil*) and “nonexistent” (*ma‘dūm*). This way of looking at things underlies the famous distinction drawn by Avicenna (d. 1037) between the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) and contingent things (*mumkināt*). Discussing God in terms of *wujūd* became a

mainstay of Sufi theory from the time of al-Ghazālī, who died less than a century after Avicenna and had a great deal of influence in the manner in which Islamic philosophical terminology was adopted and adapted by the Sufis.

While negating reality from everything other than God, the statement of *tawhīd* also affirms that things possess a certain conditional and contingent reality. “There is no god but God” means that everything other than God receives any reality that it may have as a merciful bestowal from the Real Being. It follows that human consciousness, qua *human* consciousness, is essentially an illusion, because consciousness is a reality, and “There is no reality but the Real.” Hence, “There is no consciousness but the Divine Consciousness.”

To say that human consciousness is “essentially” an illusion, however, does not mean that it has no reality whatsoever. It simply means that it is dependent upon and derivative from the divine consciousness, which is the only consciousness that is fully real. To the extent that the derivativeness and relativity of human consciousness is not acknowledged and experienced, people will fail to recognize the Real, the world, and themselves for what they are.

Human Nature

In discussing God’s relationship with the cosmos, Sufi authors understand implicitly or say explicitly that everything makes manifest the signs (*āyāt*) and traces (*āthān*) of the divine names, which is to say that the cosmos (*‘ālam*) and everything within it are signposts (*‘alam*) and marks (*‘alāma*) of the Real. Human beings are distinguished from other creatures by having the

potential to show forth the signs and marks of the supreme name of God (that is, the name *Allāh*), or, what comes down to practically the same thing, the full range of the divine names. This explains why philosophers sometimes describe the goal of their quest as “gaining similarity to God to the extent of human capacity” (*al-tashabbuh bi'l-ilāh bi qadr ṭāqat al-basha*) or simply “deiformity” (*ta'alluh*, being like unto God).⁶ Sufis prefer the expression “assuming God’s character traits as one’s own” (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*), which Ibn ‘Arabī offers as a definition of Sufism.⁷

The Sufis find the notion of deiformity implicit in the Koranic verse, “He [God] taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:31). They also find it in the Prophet’s reiteration of the Biblical statement, “God created Adam in his own form [*ṣūra*].” Adam, the first human being, was also the first prophet (*nabī*), and the first perfect human being. His perfection was intimately bound up with his omniscience, the fact that God taught him all the names of both created things and of God himself. It is Adam’s consciousness of the rightful place of things relative to God and his own proper response to things that gave him the quality of being God’s vicegerent or viceroy (*khalīfa*) in the earth.

Islam does not consider Adam a “sinner.” Rather, Adam “disobeyed” (*‘aṣā*) after having “forgotten” (*nasiya*) the divine commandment not to approach the tree, and that was the end of his disobedience. When Adam and Eve remembered, they repented and were forgiven, and then they were sent

⁶ The final sentence of Avicenna’s famous book *al-Najāh* (“The Deliverance”) ends with the word *ta'alluh*: “He [the prophet] is a human being who is distinct from other people through his deiformity.” The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (fl. 10th c.), among other early philosophers, also used the word (see Murata, *Tao*, p. 262). Mullā Ṣadrā is famously called Ṣadr al-Muta’illihīn, “The Foremost of the Deiform.”

⁷ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 283 ff.

down to the earth to play their proper roles as vicegerents. Human beings, then, are created in the form of God with the innate potential of having full consciousness of all the names, but they also have the tendency to forget, and this tendency predominates in Adam's children.

In order to achieve their proper status as vicegerents, people must "remember" (*dhikr*) God—that is, become conscious of Him—and perform their duties toward him as servant (*'abd*). All of Islamic ritual is focused on keeping God in mind, and Sufism in particular takes remembrance of God as the essential human task. Thus the word *dhikr*, which also means "mention," designates already in the Koran and Hadith the ritual repetition of divine names or Koranic formulae. This is why scholars often translate *dhikr* in the Sufi context as "invocation," and they point out that methodical practice of *dhikr* is similar to the *mantra* in Indian religions or the Jesus prayer in Christianity.

So, remembering God is to repeat his name and to attempt to be aware of his presence, for, as the Koran says, "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). Remembrance is the means whereby people can recover the knowledge, consciousness, and understanding that are innate to the primordial human nature (*fiṭra*) that was given to their father Adam. It is the process of recovering true consciousness and the primordial deiformity of the soul.

The Return

In the more theoretical discussions of the human situation, authors speak of the "origin" (*mabda*) and the "return" (*ma'ād*), terms derived from Koranic verses like, "He originates creation, then He makes it return" (10:4). So central

is this notion to Islamic thinking that theologians consider the “Return” (often translated as “eschatology”) as the third of the three principles of Islamic faith (after *tawhīd* and prophecy). In place of origin and return, many Sufis prefer to speak of “the arc of descent” (*qaws al-nuzūl*) and “the arc of ascent” (*qaws al-ṣu‘ūd*). This terminology goes back to the “two bows” mentioned in Koran 53:9, in reference to the Prophet’s nearness to God during the *mi‘rāj*. Given that “bow” also means “arc” (as with Latin *arcus*), Sufi theoreticians understand the two arcs to make up “the circle of existence” (*dā’irat al-wujūd*), which begins and ends at God.

The cosmos, then, is “everything other than God,” and it consists of a descending arc leading away from God and an ascending arc leading back to God. Some parts of the arc are closer to God and others further away—ontologically and qualitatively, of course, not “spatially.” Things can be divided into three basic worlds, which the Koran calls “the heavens, the earth, and what is between the two” (*al-samawāt wa’l-arḍ wa mā baynahumā*). In the theoretical writings, these are often called the world of spirits (*arwāḥ*), the world of bodies (*ajsām*), and the world of images (*mithāl* or *khayāl*). This last world, which Henry Corbin called *mundus imaginalis*, is an intermediary realm that allows the intrinsic consciousness of invisible, spiritual beings to come into contact with the darkness and dullness of bodily things. On the descending arc, the world of images allows spirits to become embodied, and on the ascending arc it allows bodies to become spiritualized. The three basic levels

of existence are replicated in the human microcosm as spirit (*rūḥ*), soul (*nafs*), and body (*jism*).

God created mankind, as the Koran puts it, “to serve Me” or “to be My servants” (*li ya‘budūnī*, 51:56). Ibn ‘Abbās, the well-known companion of the Prophet, already explained this as meaning “to recognize Me” or “to become conscious of Me” (*li ya‘rifūnī*), using the verbal form of *ma‘rifā*. In the later tradition this verse is often explained in terms of a purported *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I desired to be recognized [*yu‘raf*], so I created the creatures that they might recognize Me.”

The only creatures that can recognize God fully—that is, in respect of his One Self and all of his names—are human individuals, created in his form. Other creatures are imperfect images of the Divine Reality and, in fact, were created as the means to bring man into existence and as the signs and marks of the divine names in the cosmos. The diversity of creatures with all their wondrous mysteries is nothing but the outward reverberation of the infinite Hidden Treasure. The fact that human beings are God’s goal in creating the universe is proven precisely by their unique ability to know “all the names,” to become conscious of all that exists, to be the self (*nafs*) whose external counterpart is the cosmos in its entirety.

One of the first implications of *tawḥīd* is that everything comes from God and everything returns to him. This return is compulsory (*iḍṭirārī*), meaning that nothing whatsoever has any say in the matter. But human beings, because of their divine form and their self-consciousness, exercise a certain degree of

freedom. Accepting or rejecting the call of the prophets depends upon their own choice. Like everything else, they are compelled to return to God, but they also have the option of engaging in “the voluntary return” (*al-rujū‘ al-ikhtiyārī*) by following the prophets, who have shown the way to actualize the fullness of the human potential. In other words, prophetic guidance can lead to recognizing, understanding, and becoming conscious of the Hidden Treasure and assimilating the divine character traits that this implies.

The Path

It is worth remembering that the mythic structure of Islamic religiosity is shaped by two events: the descent (*nuzūl*) of the Koran and the ascent (*mi‘rāj*) of Muhammad to the divine presence. God revealed himself through his Word, which is his articulate and intelligible self-expression. He did so in order that the Word might be the means for the human soul to awaken to its innate nature and be guided to its self-realization, that is, the actualization of its deiformity. The Prophet Muhammad, as the recipient of the Message from Gabriel, the angel of revelation, assimilated the Message into his own being and was totally assimilated by it; he was then taken by Gabriel to the fruit of that assimilation, the personal encounter with God.

The accounts of the *mi‘rāj* make clear that Gabriel took Muhammad on a specific route: first to Jerusalem, then stage by stage through the seven heavens (that is, seven ascending levels of being and consciousness), until he eventually reached the furthest limits of the angelic realm. At that point Gabriel told him to continue on to the Divine Presence alone, which he did. Upon his

return, he instituted the daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) as the ritual means whereby the believers could rise up to God. As the purported hadith has it, “The daily prayers are the *miʿrāj* of the believer” (*al-ṣalāt miʿrāj al-muʿmin*).

Islamic practice is understood as a path or road that leads to God. The word that is generally used for the revealed law, Shariah (*sharīʿa*) means path, as does the word that is generally used for Sufi organizations, Tariqah (*ṭarīqa*). A whole genre of Sufi writings explains in more or less detail the stages (*maqāmāt*, *manāzil*) of the path that travelers (*sāʾir*, *sālik*, *musāfir*) must traverse in order to enter into God’s Presence. The archetype for all of this is the *miʿrāj*, the ascent to God achieved by the Prophet.

What the authors of these treatises hold in common is that the journey is dependent on divine grace and demands discipline and self-effacement. By following the path, seekers of God can shuck off their blameworthy character traits and assume praiseworthy character traits, which make manifest the divine names and attributes. Here again we meet implications of the negation and affirmation set down in the formula of *tawḥīd*. Some authors sum up the whole process precisely with these two terms, negation and affirmation. Others prefer the more famous expressions, *fanāʾ* or “annihilation” and *baqāʾ* or “subsistence.”

Finding God

One of the most common methods that Sufi authors employed to clarify the nature of consciousness and to prepare the way for its actualization was to meditate upon the names of God, which designate the basic qualities of

existence. Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. ca. 1295), a second-generation follower of Ibn ʿArabī, points out that there are sixteen divine names that refer to various modalities of awareness and consciousness in the Supreme Reality, beginning with al-ʿAlīm, the Knowing.⁸ Several of the qualities designated by these names play major roles in Sufi discussions of consciousness, such as Seeing (*al-baṣīr*) and Light (*al-nūr*). Let me say something about two more of these names, Finding (*al-wājid*) and Witnessing (*al-shahīd*). Grasping how they were understood can give us further insight into the Sufi notion of consciousness and, at the same time, help us see what is going on in one of the most famous debates in the history of Sufism, that set in motion by the Naqshbandī shaykh, Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624). He criticized Ibn ʿArabī for believing in *waḥdat al-wujūd*, “the oneness of being” and for not recognizing that a true understanding of *tawḥīd* demands *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, “the oneness of witnessing.” Modern-day observers have sometimes translated these two terms as “the unity of existence” and “the unity of consciousness,” and with that translation we seem to have an opposition between an objective view of reality and a subjective view. In fact, however, the discussion is much more subtle, and this becomes apparent when we look back at the divine names from which the two words *shuhūd* and *wujūd* are derived.

In his book on the divine names, al-Ghazālī tells us that the name *al-wājid*, “the Finding” or “the Finder,” designates God as the opposite of “lacking” (*fāqid*). God is he who lacks nothing of what is appropriate for him. As al-

⁸ Farghānī, *Muntaha'l-madārik* (Cairo: 1293/1876), vol. 1, pp. 31-32.

Ghazālī explains, “He is the Finder in an absolute sense, and anything else, even if it finds something of the attributes and causes of perfection, also lacks certain things, so it can only find in a relative sense.”⁹ This is a straightforward statement of *tawḥīd*: There is none that finds but God, so anything else that finds can only have received a glimmer of this divine quality.

Notice that Finder is the active participle of three nouns: *wujūd*, *wijdān*, and *wajd*. All three mean “to find,” but each has different connotations and usages. *Wijdān* commonly designates the act of finding within oneself, so it can mean feeling, emotion, sentiment, awareness. *Wajd* is likely to mean an intense or overpowering form of inner finding and is commonly translated as “ecstasy.” Most interesting here, however, is the word *wujūd*. From the time of Avicenna onward, *wujūd* in the sense of being/existence is a central discussion in philosophy and soon also in Kalām and Sufism.¹⁰ But, we need to remember that what “exists,” in the original sense of this Arabic word, is simply “what is found.”¹¹ Existence and finding, or being and consciousness, are inseparably linked; no object can be found/can be existent without a finding/existing

⁹ *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma‘ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, edited by Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971), p. 143.

¹⁰ It is true that the philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191) does not give *wujūd* the same prominence. Nonetheless, by speaking of reality primarily in terms of “light” (*nūr*), he stresses even more strongly that illuminated and illuminating consciousness lies at the pinnacle of human possibility. See, for example, Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, edited and translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Some philosophers made full use of the dual meaning of the word. Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, writing in Persian, explains that *wujūd* has two senses, “being” (*ḥastī*) and “finding” (*yāft*), and then proceeds to analyze the structure of existence as leading from potential to actual being, to potential finding, and then to actual finding. The highest level of “existence,” in other words, is actualized consciousness of all that may be known. See Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 42-45.

subject. Finder, Found, and the act of finding and being found—*wājid*, *mawjūd*, and *wujūd*—are three sides of the self-same reality.

“Existence,” in short, cannot be discussed in the Islamic context as inert, passive, unconscious, chaotic, arbitrary, aimless, and lacking in qualitative richness. On the contrary, in its pure form—the Necessary Being of Avicenna, the Real Being of Ibn ‘Arabī—it demands by its very essence the diverse attributes that give rise to an ordered, wise, compassionate, and blessed universe.¹²

In studying the diverse writings of the Muslim philosophers, it is sometimes easy to forget that the final object of investigation—*wujūd*, the very being and existence that is the Primal Reality—is simultaneously the Primal Consciousness and the root of awareness. For his part, Ibn ‘Arabī frequently reminds us of the quasi-identity of *wujūd*, *wijdān*, and *wajd*.¹³ In his understanding of these terms, seekers on the path to God find the fullness of consciousness and existence when they find God by losing themselves; annihilation of egocentric limitations brings about subsistence of the Divine Form. It is at this point that God is “the hearing through which the servant hears, the seeing through which he sees.”

Al-Ghazālī sums up the significance of the name Witness, *shahīd*, by saying that it designates the second of the two sorts of knowing that God mentions when he calls himself *‘ālim al-ghayb wa’l-shahāda*, “The Knower of

¹² In one work Avicenna counts these attributes as seven: unity, eternity, knowledge, desire, power, wisdom, and generosity. See Chittick, *Heart*, pp. 39-40.

¹³ For example, by defining the term *wujūd*, in keeping with a standard Sufi gloss, as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (*wijdān al-ḥaqq fi’l-wajd*). *Futūḥāt* vol. 2, p. 538, line 1; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 212.

the absent and the witnessed,” or “the Knower of the unseen and the visible” (e.g., Koran 6:73). The name *shahīd* is an active participle from *shuhūd*, which means witnessing, seeing with the eyes, being present, testifying. For his part, Farghānī explains that the name means that the Knower is present (*ḥuḍūr*) with what becomes manifest from him (i.e., everything) and that he cannot possibly be absent (*ghayba*) from anything. By talking of the two basic worlds, al-Ghazālī makes the discussion pertain to cosmology, and by talking of “presence” and “absence”—standard Sufi terms designating contrasting states (*ḥāl*) of awareness—Farghānī focuses on consciousness.

Getting back to Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī, he criticized Ibn ‘Arabī on the basis of an understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that was current in India, and he did not seem to know that Ibn ‘Arabī himself never used the expression. The gist of what Sirhindī says is that *waḥdat al-wujūd* declares the identity of God and the world, or an ontological (*wujūdī*) continuity between the One and the many, much in the style of what we might call “pantheism.” Sirhindī does not seem to grasp that Ibn ‘Arabī saw the true understanding of *wujūd* to lie in “finding” (*wujūd*) the Real within the soul and “witnessing” (*shuhūd*) that there is no finder but God and no witness but God.

Or, to put this in another way, it is completely wrong to think, as Louis Massignon and others have claimed, that Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophical position can be summed up in the expression “existential monism.” Even “unity of existence,” or “oneness of being,” is not really adequate to what he is saying. It

would be closer to his position to translate *waḥdat al-wujūd* as “the oneness of consciousness,” given that, in the last analysis, “There is no finder but the One.”

*

As a final word, let me simply say that the more we study the great variety of terms that are used in Islamic texts to talk about consciousness, the clearer it becomes that Sufis in particular look at consciousness as a spectrum of human possibility that extends into the infinite. In this view of things, all human subjects are disclosures of God’s own subjectivity, and every knowing subject, human or otherwise, is a unique manifestation of the divine consciousness.

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