

3 On Self-Knowledge, Divine Trial, and Discipleship

Mukhtar H. Ali

The Imperative of Self-knowledge

Islamic spirituality is rooted in self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*). It is through the self that one fathoms reality, recognizes truth, and attains various degrees of human perfection. Islamic discourse on spiritual psychology employs various terms for the self, such as *soul (nafs)*, *heart (qalb)*, *intellect ('aql)*, and *spirit (rūh)*. The emphasis throughout this study is the *nafs* (soul), even though the *nafs* is always conceived within the context of the heart and intellect. In the language of revelation, the soul's innate ability to recognize truth is called *fiṭra*. The Quran describes *fiṭra* as a God-given innate human nature, "Turn your face towards the religion in pure faith—with the divine innate nature upon which God originated mankind. There is no altering God's creation. That is the upright religion, but most men know not" (30:30). The Quran also reveals that human nature is the manifestation of the inviolable divine spirit, "When I have fashioned him and breathed into him from My spirit, bow down before him" (Q 15:29). It is the origin of man and his very path and return to God, expressed as the "upright religion." The Prophet affirmed that the gnosis of God is through the door of self-knowledge, "He who knows himself has come to know his Lord."¹

Just as the soul is the path to God, it is also the means of knowing creation, as Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) said, "Do not be ignorant of yourself, for he who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of all things."² True knowledge of things corresponds to the degree of one's self-knowledge, because one contemplates existence in the mirror of the soul through the light of intelligence. God reveals Himself in outward existence as He does in the heart of man. These are the divine signs and the places of contemplation as the Quran describes, "We will show them our signs on the horizons and in themselves until they know that it is the truth" (Q 41:53) and "Have they not reflected in themselves? God has not created the heavens and the earth, and all that is in between, except in truth and a specified term. Most men

1 'Abd al-Wāhid Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam wa-durar al-kalim* (Tehran: Daftar-i Nashr-i Farhang-i Islāmī, 2000), no. 7946.

2 Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, 9965.

disbelieve in the meeting with their Lord” (Q 30:8). Both verses indicate that the divine signs are fathomed through self-reflection so that the real trove of knowledge, which is the human soul, will not reveal its secrets until it is mined. Muslim sources cite Jesus saying:

Do not say, “Knowledge is in the heavens so who will ascend and bring it back?,” or “Knowledge is in the earth, so who will go down and mine it?,” or “Knowledge is across the ocean, so who will cross it and return with it?” Knowledge is forged into your hearts! Refine yourself before God through the conduct of the spiritual and adorn yourself with the character of the truthful, and knowledge will manifest from your hearts until it immerses you and overflows from you.³

Since human potential is mined through perfection of character, self-knowledge constitutes knowing how to discipline and transform the soul, from its base substance to its brilliant essence. Imam ‘Alī said, “The soul is a precious gem; he who guards it elevates it, and he who squanders it debases it”⁴ and “The more a person increases in knowledge, the more he pays attention to his own soul and the more he strives to discipline and rectify it.”⁵

The Path to God

The path to God in the Islamic mystical tradition is called wayfaring or *sayr wa sulūk*. *Sayr* means traversing a path, and *sulūk* means advancing in stages of proximity to the divine presence, in action and in state. *Sulūk* also means the transference from one state of worship to another, one action to another, one abstention to another, from action to abstention, one theophany to another, or one level of the soul to another. It is also said that *sulūk* is purifying the heart from blameworthy character traits and inculcating it with praiseworthy ones. However, not all who tread the path arrive. Some do not complete the journey, or they perish along the way. Some flee (*al-sālik al-hārib*), and some stop midway (*al-sālik al-wāqif*), but if they repent, they return as wayfarers, otherwise they remain stagnant or regress. Those who attain the divine presence are the realized wayfarers (*al-sālik al-wāṣil*).

Whether one is a wayfarer or not in the technical sense, there is no escape from striving because Islam regards this temporal world as illusory and the hereafter as real: “The life of this world is merely a diversion and amusement; the true life is in the Hereafter, if only they knew” (Q 29:64). Furthermore, God asks rhetorically in the Quran, “So where are you going?” then He answers, “To your Lord is your return” (Q 81:26). “O mankind, you are ever toiling towards your Lord and will

3 Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Jāmi‘ al-asrār wa-manba‘ al-anwār*, ed. Henry Corbin and Osman Yahia (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Ta‘rīkh al-‘Arabī, 1969), 513.

4 Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, 3494.

5 Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, 7204.

meet Him” (Q 84:6). God has therefore guided everyone on a particular trajectory, some of whom He predisposed to matters of truth and knowledge. Among them, those “who purify [the soul] succeed and those who corrupt it fail” (Q 91:9–10). Experts have identified seven stages of the soul’s ruin: (1) those who turn away from the truth, reject divine signs; (2) those who reject divine signs become veiled; (3) the veiled are separated from the truth and become preoccupied with falsehood and illusion; (4) divine blessings are withdrawn (*salb al-mazād*), (5) then God strikes out past deeds (*salb al-qadīm*); (6) one dismisses all matters of spirituality, (7) then ultimately, harbors enmity towards God, the saints, and the people of truth.

Success on the path to God entails self-discipline and purification of the soul. According to the famous Hadith, “The Prophet of God dispatched a contingent of the army (to the battlefield). Upon their return, he said: ‘Blessed are those who have performed the minor *jihād* and have yet to perform the major *jihād*.’ When asked, ‘What is the major *jihād*?’ The Prophet replied: ‘The *jihād* of the self.’”⁶ *Jihād* lexically means to strive and struggle, but in the context of the Hadith, it means to engage in warfare with the self because the soul is the origin of conflict and contrary properties; it is the battlefield of the angels, satans, and beasts. At inception, human souls are devoid of inscription, image, vice, or virtue, as traits are established within it through repetitive actions and attitudes. However, Muslim metaphysicians generally view the soul in a negative light. Al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) writes that the soul (*nafs*) refers to “those qualities of the servant that are defective and character traits and acts that are blameworthy.”⁷ The Quran affirms that “the soul, indeed, commands to evil” (Q 12:53) and the Prophet said, “Your greatest enemy is the soul between your two sides.”⁸ True humanity, however, lies in conquering the soul through the light of the intellect, as Imam ‘Alī said, “God Almighty composed the angels of intellect but without desire and composed the animals of desire but without intellect yet composed man of both. Thus, he whose intellect conquers his desire is superior to the angels and he whose desire dominates his intellect is worse than the animals.”⁹ He also said, “Struggle against your soul in obeying God, just as one fights an enemy and overcomes it. The strongest of people is one who has triumphed over his soul.”¹⁰ He also said, “Take command of your souls by continuously struggling with them.”¹¹ “O people take charge of the disciplining of yourselves and redress them from the wildness of their habits.”¹²

With respect to the various effects arising from the soul’s angelic, satanic, and bestial nature, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) says, “The soul is afflicted with four diverse qualities: The first is the meanings derived from the attributes of Lordship

6 Ibn Babawayh, *Ma‘ānī al-akhbār* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2009), 160.

7 Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 2001), 305.

8 Muḥammad Rayshahrī, *Mīzān al-ḥikma*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001), 2439.

9 Ibn Bābawayh, *‘Ilal al-sharā‘i’* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2006), 1:4, chapter 6, no. 1.

10 Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 4761.

11 Āmidī, *Ghurar al-ḥikam*, no. 2489.

12 al-Sharīf al Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, ed. Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ (Beirut: Dār Kutub al-Lubnānī), saying no. 359.

such as arrogance, invincibility, love of praise, mightiness, and autonomy. It is also afflicted with the character traits of the satans, such as deception, cunning, envy, and suspicion. It is afflicted with the nature of beasts, that is, the love of food, drink, and copulation. Despite all this, it is held responsible for the qualities of servanthood, such as fear, humility and lowliness.”¹³

Sufi authors describe the interrelationships between the soul, body, and spirit in the following way: the soul acts as an intermediary between the immaterial spirit and the material body, the nexus through which the divergent properties of each interact. The spirit is active and the soul is passive; the spirit possesses life, knowledge, power, speech, hearing, and sight, and through its receptivity, the soul actualizes these powers through the body. When the spirit fertilizes the soul, it gives birth to bodily functions in the external world. Alternatively, the spirit like the father and the body like the mother give birth to the soul, a child that is born from the marriage between spirit and body. The bodily powers, however, are not intrinsic to the soul as they are for the spirit. It is only through the relationship between the spirit and the soul do these powers arise in the body.

The ancient philosophers maintained that there are three souls: the vegetal, animal, and rational. Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350) says that it is called the soul “because of its attachment and governance of the body. When vegetal activity arises through its attendants, it is called the ‘vegetal soul’ (*al-naḥs al-nabāṭiyya*), and when animal activity arises, it is called the ‘animal soul’ (*al-naḥs al-ḥaywāniyya*).”¹⁴ When referring to the vital substance of the vegetal realm, it is called the vegetal soul; when referring to the life-giving force of animality, it is called the animal soul; when referring to the power of reason, it is called the rational soul. According to Imām ‘Alī, there is a fourth type of soul, which he calls the universal divine soul:

There are four souls: the growing vegetal, the sensory animal, the sacred rational, and the universal divine. The growing vegetal soul is a power originating from the four elements that begins at conception; it resides in the liver; its substance is derived from the rarified aspects of food; its activity is growth and increase. When it separates, it reintegrates with its origin and does not have independent existence.

The sensory animal soul is a celestial power and instinctual fire whose origin is the celestial spheres; its genesis occurs at physical birth; its activity is life, movement, domination, worldliness, and desire; it resides in the heart and separates upon deterioration.

The sacred rational soul is a divine power that originates at the time of birth in this world. Its seat is true metaphysical knowledge; its substance is the intellect’s affirmations; its activity is gnosis of the divine. The reason for its separation is the dissolution of the physical apparatus. When it returns to its origin it remains autonomous.

13 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb* (Beirut: Dār Kutub ‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 159.

14 Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Ḥasanzada Āmulī (Qum: Bustān-i Kitāb, 2002), 209.

The universal divine soul is a divine power, a self-subsisting simple essence; its origin is the Intellect to which it orients and returns when it becomes complete, resembling it. . . . It is the lofty Essence of God. He who knows it will not be wretched and he who is ignorant of it is lost and astray.¹⁵

The universal divine soul originates in the intellect which is the first and highest creation of God. It is the foundation of the path to God and much has been written on the nature of the intellect and heart. It suffices to quote a Hadith attributed to the Prophet who describes the primordial supremacy of the Intellect and its attending characteristics:

God created the Intellect from a hidden, treasured¹⁶ light in His ancient knowledge, of which neither a sent messenger nor a proximate angel had any awareness. He made knowledge its soul, understanding its spirit, abstinence its head, modesty its eyes, wisdom its tongue, compassion its concern, and mercy its heart. Then He adorned it and strengthened it with ten things: certainty, faith, truthfulness, serenity, sincerity, companionship, generosity, contentment, submission, and gratitude. Then He commanded it to go back so the Intellect went back. Then God commanded it to draw near, so it drew near. Then He said, “Speak!” It said, “Praise be to God who does not have an opposite, nor equal, nor similar, nor equal, nor substitute, nor equivalent, before whom all things are humble and abased.”

God, the Almighty said, “By My Might and Majesty, I have not created anything better than you, nor more obedient to me, nor loftier, nor nobler, nor more honorable than you. By you I impose, I bestow, I am acknowledged as One, worshipped, called upon, hoped for, yearned for, feared, and warned against. Reward is through you and punishment is through you.”¹⁷

The Degrees of the Soul’s Perfection

The goal of every wayfarer is the soul’s perfection, the degrees of which Sufi authors have identified in manuals of spiritual wayfaring. Adhering to the Quranic typology, Qayṣarī defines the three levels of the soul:

When the animal powers dominate the spiritual powers, the soul is called “commanding” [*ammāra*] soul. However, when there is a glimmer of the heart’s light from the Unseen, revealing its perfection, the rational soul’s

15 Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, *al-Ḥaqā’iq fī maḥāsīn al-akhlāq* (Qum: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 2002), 363.

16 “Treasured” may refer to the famous Hadith of the Hidden Treasure: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world that I may be known.”

17 Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1983), 3:94, chapter 4.

awareness of its iniquitous end and the corruption of its states, the soul is called the “reproaching” [*lawwāma*], since it reproaches its actions.

This degree is a preliminary for the manifestation of the degree of the heart, because if the heart’s light prevails and its dominion appears over the powers of the animal soul, the soul attains peace and is called “tranquil” [*muṭma`inna*].¹⁸

Though the stations of wayfaring are numerous, there are seven key stations of the soul’s development before reaching perfection.¹⁹ Upon commencing the spiritual journey, the first station is called the commanding soul (*al-naḥs al-ammāra*), which is the carnal, animal soul, mentioned in the verse, “I do not absolve my own soul, for the [carnal] soul indeed commands to evil” (Q 12:53). The Prophet said, “My Lord, do not entrust me to my soul even for the blink of an eye.”²⁰ A soul that is immersed in animal desires is figuratively human although it exhibits some human attributes, as Imām ‘Alī states, “His form is that of a human, but his heart is that of an animal.”²¹ Imām Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d. 713) says in one of his supplications:

My God, to You I complain of a soul commanding to evil, rushing to offenses, eager to disobey You, and exposing itself to Your anger. It takes me on the roads of disasters, it makes me the easiest of perishers before You; many its pretexts, drawn out its expectations; when evil touches it, it is anxious, when good touches it, inclining to sport and diversion,²² full of heedlessness and inattention.²³

The commanding soul is engulfed in veils of darkness and is thus not concerned with divine commandments or prohibitions; it follows only the impulses of innate carnal desire. By recognizing the patterns and characteristics of this soul, one can apply a suitable spiritual formula or invocation (*dhikr*) to break its fetters and allow progress to the next stage. As it is immersed in carnal nature, the abode of this soul is the material world, which is the furthest realm from divinity. The only recourse to resist the commanding soul is to firmly stand up against it, as the Quran advises, “Say: ‘I advise you to one thing and that is to rise up for God, singly or in pairs, then contemplate.’” The appropriate invocation here is to declare, “There is no god but God!”

18 Qaysarī, *The Horizons of Being: The Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qaysarī*, trans. Mukhtar H. Ali (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 209.

19 The remainder of this section of the article is based on Professor Akram Almajid’s oral commentary upon Baḥr al-‘Ulūm’s (d. 1797) treatise, *Tuḥfat al-mulūk fi sayr wa-sulūk*.

20 al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadāra, 2015), 6:147.

21 Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, 119.

22 Allusion to the Q 70:19–21, “Surely man was created fretful—when evil touches him, he is anxious; when good visits him, he is grudging.”

23 ‘Alī b. Husayn (Zayn al-‘Ābidīn), *The Psalms of Islam*, trans. William Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1988), 235.

When the light of faith flickers within the soul, it begins to discern truth from falsehood and enters the second station called the reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*), according to the Quranic verse, “I swear by the self-reproaching soul” (Q 75:2). It begins to reproach its vile attributes and loathsome actions, regretting its previous states of animality. Thus, it begins to adhere to the divine commandments, admits wrongdoing, holds itself accountable, and regrets past deeds. Characteristic of the reproachful soul is that it faces veils of light rather than darkness, so it differentiates between truth and falsehood and engages in good works. However, because it is governed by reproach, it blames itself and becomes hypercritical of others. This soul has not reached the level of sincerity, so it is afflicted with ostentation, vanity, and love of leadership. Because of these fatal vices and its proximity to the commanding soul, it is in grave danger, as the Prophet indicates, “Mankind is doomed, except the knowers. The knowers are doomed except the doers, the doers are doomed except the sincere and the sincere are in grave danger.”²⁴ The highest station of the reproachful soul is the station of sincerity. It is the last stage of the pious (*abrār*) before they enter the stations of those drawn near to God (*muqarrabīn*), that is, those who dwell in the third station and beyond. The proximate consider the reproachful soul as a vice, as the famous dictum expresses, “The good deeds of the virtuous are the vices of the proximate.”²⁵ The soul is not safe in the station of sincerity until one transcends even the awareness of sincerity. This is accomplished by realizing that every good deed originates and belongs to God. Transcending self-awareness—experientially, not intellectually—is the effacement of witnessing one’s deeds. This is the state of those drawn proximate to God. They have set their eyes solely on God, and thus attribute no deeds to themselves.

If the soul persists in abstaining from vices and whims of the desirous carnal soul, it begins to receive inspiration (*ilhām*), and enters the third station. It is called the inspired soul (*al-nafs al-mulhama*) according to the Quranic verse, “By the soul and He who fashioned it and inspired it with its vices and virtues” (Q 91:8). The inspired soul is a lofty station in which it encounters veils of light, not darkness; those who reach this station are considered gnostics (*‘arif*). Entering the unseen, the wayfarer “hears” the angels and satans without instrument, whereas in the previous stations, which are closer to animality, he hears nothing. The experts consider this to be the most dangerous place for the wayfarer due to the difficulty in distinguishing the majestic from the beatific and the angelic from the satanic. The danger lies in the fact that the soul still contains remnants of nature and humanness (*bashariyya*). So, it is possible for the wayfarer to plummet to the station of the commanding soul, “the lowest of the low,” or transform into a devil and an enemy of the spiritual master (*shaykh*), the path and the brethren.

24 Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1986), 4:156.

25 al-‘Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā’* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1968), 1:357. This statement is attributed to the early Sufi master al-Kharrāz (d. 899).

At this stage, adhering to the *shaykh* is paramount because the inexperienced wayfarer travels through uncharted realms of the soul and worlds he has never experienced. Upon receiving inspiration, the wayfarer may feel that he has reached the highest station and may even make claims to divinity. To safeguard from these perils, the wayfarer must adhere to the *sharīʿa* (law) outwardly and inwardly, or the *sharīʿa* and *ṭarīqa* (way), from the very beginning of *sulūk* until its end. Then he must be humble before the *shaykh*, like a corpse in the hands of the washer, for the *shaykh* is responsible for his awaking, revival, and arrival at lofty stations. It is the *shaykh* who elucidated the path, illuminated the heart, discerned the pitfalls of the lower soul, offered cures for its illnesses, reinforced him with prayers and invocations, and made him arrive at this lofty station of the inspired soul. Obedience to the *shaykh* does not imply that one abandons his humanity and dignity. In the same way that one worships God with dignity, he also obeys with dignity.

Finally, it is imperative that the wayfarer does not make claims above the *shaykh*, even if he is addressed by an angel or made to see a certain vision. There are two reasons for this: the first is that the *shaykh* is the realized gnostic, experienced in the knowledge of the path and its pitfalls. Whereas the wayfarer has only recently been initiated into the stations of gnosis and inspiration. The *shaykh* is tried and true, but the wayfarer is still a novice. The second aspect deals with spiritual authority (*wilāya*) of the *shaykh* over the disciple. The disciple is born from the spiritual fatherhood of the *shaykh* who has authority over him, just as a father has a right over the son even if the son becomes self-sufficient.

When the agitation of the inspired soul starts to settle and no trace or memory of the commanding self remains, the wayfarer enters the fourth station of the tranquil soul (*al-naḥs al-muṭmaʿinna*). The Quran states, “O tranquil soul, return to your Lord well-pleased, and pleasing to Him” (Q 89:27–28). The soul acquires tranquility from the incessant prompting of its carnal desires, but if there are still provocation from its lower aspect, then it regresses to the station of the reproachful soul. The tranquil soul is the first degree of human perfection.

When the tranquil soul develops further, extinguishing all of its desires, relinquishing attachment to stations and ambitions, it is called the contented soul (*al-naḥs al-rāḍiya*). However, since traces of attachment remain, this annihilation (*fanāʿ*) must be followed by the state of subsistence (*baqāʿ*). So, it is the final station in *sulūk*, whereby human attributes are replaced by divine attributes.

After achieving this, the soul may attain a station where both God and the creation are pleased with it, so it is called the pleasing soul (*al-naḥs al-marḍiya*). In this station, the soul beholds divine beauty, content in witnessing the divine attributes reflected within itself and thereafter, becoming the object of God’s gaze and good pleasure.

Then if it is commanded to return to creation as a guide, it is called the perfected soul (*al-naḥs al-kāmila*), which is the station of spiritual guardianship and the Pole (*quṭb*) of existence.

The Soul's Unknowability and Discipleship

Though the path to God is tread through self-knowledge, from another perspective, it is said that attaining complete knowledge of the soul is impossible because it originates from the divine spirit that God breathed into man, a reality that is fundamentally unknowable. God says, “He fashioned him and breathed into him from His Spirit” (Q 38:72), “placed on the earth a vicegerent” (Q 2:30), and “He taught Adam all the names” (Q 2:31). Human vicegerency is the manifestation of the all-comprehensive name *Allah*. Therefore, the Prophet’s statement “He who knows himself knows his Lord” may be interpreted in an apophatic sense: if one were to realize the soul’s true reality, then he will have come to know God’s true reality. However, since absolute knowledge of God is impossible, knowledge of the soul is also impossible.

The second problem in knowing the soul is that the more one tries to know it, the more it eludes the seeker. The contemporary sage Akram Almajid writes:

If the soul seeks, it seeks itself; and that is a loss, since every seeker of the self loses the self. He who seeks his self loses it, but he who loses his self finds it—in knowledge and reality—whether it is in the Intellect, imagination, or the senses, for all are one reality. Were it not for the manifestation of reality in the soul and the soul’s transformation into a new creation thereby, it would never find itself, just like one seeking water in a mirage.²⁶

The soul is elusive like a mirage, smoke diffused in a room, a water spill or subtle leak whose source is impossible to find. It constantly deceives its owner, hiding or masquerading in various disguises. It feigns piety, faith, righteousness, sincerity, and justice, until it is ruled by the light of the intellect. Imam ‘Alī says, “The commanding, seducing soul flatters [its owner] like a hypocrite and adorns the garb of an agreeable friend, until it deceives and overcomes him like a pouncing enemy and dominating tyrant, driving him thereby into ruin.”²⁷ When the soul deceives a person, it is to be expected, since its nature demands that it find strategies to attain its desire. Deception here means that the soul seeks one thing while the intellect seeks something else. God created the carnal appetites (*shahawāt*) and placed them within the soul. Were it not for desire, one could not subsist in the material world, for it is a person’s mount, mover, and means of survival. Like the animal, its nature is attachment, irrespective of its being good or bad. So, if one trains it to pray, it attaches to prayer, and one orients himself towards spiritual perfections, then it attaches itself to its attainment. Sometimes, it attaches to a perceived goodness such as abstention, prayer, or some religious rite, even if it may be detrimental for that person. It is considered detrimental because of the *attachment*

26 Cited, with modifications, from Akram Almajid, *The New Creation*, trans. Mukhtar H. Ali (London: Sage Press, 2022), 198.

27 Āmidī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam*, no. 2106.

to the act and not the act itself. There are plenty of examples of ritualistic piety and religiosity that hinder spiritual development.

Knowing the soul through itself is impossible unless it is known through the intellect's light and the heart's insight. It is possible, however, to know certain of its aspects through contemplation and self-reflection, but only an expert guide such as the clairvoyant *shaykh* and sage can see its true nature. For this reason, Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn said, "He who does not have a sage to guide him, perishes,"²⁸ for the *shaykh* is the guiding light of the intellect, the spiritual physician who diagnoses through clairvoyance (*firāsa*) and insight (*baṣīra*), then prescribes a remedy that corresponds to its real condition (*ḥaqīqa*). God may also directly inspire the soul of its true nature, as the Quran confirms, "By the soul and He who proportioned, He inspired it [with discernment] of its wickedness and its righteousness" (Q 91:8–9), and in some cases, by subjecting it to a trial.

The unknowability of the soul further provides evidence for the necessity of discipleship as Jesus declares, "Whoever holds on to his life loses it, and whoever renounces his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever desires to serve me, he must follow me; and wherever I am, there my servant will also be. Whoever serves me, my Father will honor him" (John 12:25–26). There is an inverse relationship between knowing the soul and transcending it. Just as one attains eternal life by renouncing it, one attains true knowledge of the soul through its effacement. In this case, it is the soul's annihilation (*fanā'*) in the light of the intellect, because after speaking about renouncing worldly life, Jesus enjoins his disciples to follow him wherever he may be. Since the prophet represents the intellect and the disciple represents the soul, only through the soul's surrender to the intellect does it become complete and thus honored by God.

One who strives to know God through the soul seeks the Absolute through the veils of contingency. Imam Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 765) said:

He who claims to know God through a veil, a form or a similitude is a polytheist, because a veil, form or similitude is other than Him, for He is One, Singular. How can He be Singular if one claims to know Him through something else? Only one who has come to know God through God knows Him. He who has not come to know Him through Him does not know Him, but only knows other than Him. The creatures do not perceive anything except through God and gnosis of God is not attained except through God.²⁹

If God cannot be known through the soul, then how can God be known? Imam 'Alī was asked, "How have you come to know your Lord?" He replied, "The way

28 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 78:159, no. 10.

29 Ibn Bābawayh, *al-Tawḥīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif 2008), 143, no. 7.

He has made Himself known to me.” The questioner asked, “How has He made Himself known to you?” He replied:

He is unlike any form, nor sensed through the senses, nor compared to the people. He is near in His distance, distant in His proximity, above all things and nothing can be said to be above Him. He is before all things, and nothing can be said to be before Him. He is in all things but not in the way that something is inside of another. He is outside of all things but not in the way something is outside of another. Glory be to the One who is thus, and none is like so. He is the Origin of everything.³⁰

Divine Trial and Discipleship

Having identified the stages of the soul’s transformation towards perfection, it should be known that the soul will never attain perfection unless God Himself trains it. The Prophet said, “My Lord, do not entrust me to my soul even for the blink of an eye.”³¹ He relied entirely upon God to rectify, discipline, and transform the soul. With respect to God’s training it, the Prophet said, “My Lord taught me conduct and perfected it within me.”³² This training has two aspects, one which relates to the divine names of majesty and the other to the names of beauty. God’s training through the names of majesty often relate to His trial. He tests the soul for faith with tribulation, as the Quran states, “that He may try the believers with a fair trial” (Q 8:17). Or, as Imam ‘Alī says, “The believer’s faith is not complete until he recognizes me through light, and if he knows me through light, then he is a believer whose heart God has tested for faith and expanded his breast for Islam. He has acquired gnosis of religion and so has come to perceive.”³³ Thus, trials and tribulations are necessary for the soul’s development because the soul straddles two dimensions in tension with one another, the material and the spiritual. The world is the abode of trial (*dār al-balā*), as Imam ‘Alī says, “I swear by Him Who sent him [the Prophet] with the Truth, you shall indeed be mixed and intermingled and then separated in the sieve [of divine trial and tribulation].”³⁴ Imām Ja‘far al-Šādiq states:

It is mentioned in the Book of ‘Alī that among all mankind, the prophets undergo the severest of trials, and after them their inheritors [*awṣiyā*], and after them the elect to the extent of their nobility. Indeed, the believer undergoes trial in proportion to his good deeds. So, he whose faith is sound and

30 al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī* (Tehran: Dār al-Uswa, 1991), 1:85, no. 2.

31 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dār al-Risala al-‘Ālamiyya, 2009), no. 5090.

32 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 316; ‘Abd ‘Alī b. Jum‘a Huwayzī, *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2001), 5:389, cited in Rayshahrī, *Mizān al-ḥikma*, 1:78.

33 Ibn Abī‘l-Ḥadīd, *Sharh Nahj al-balāgha* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Alamī li‘l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1995), 2: 450.

34 Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, sermon 16.

whose deeds are good, his trials are also more severe. That is because God Almighty did not make this world a place for rewarding the believer and punishing the unbeliever. One whose faith is feeble and whose (good) deeds are few faces fewer tribulations. Verily, tribulations hasten towards the believer with greater speed than rainwater towards the earth's depths.³⁵

God's trial is a part of the divine order (*sunna ilāhiyya*) that Jesus describes as the narrow gate: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and easy is the way that leads to destruction; those who enter it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is difficult that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13–14). The Imams also indicated that "there is no constriction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*) in that which God has commanded or forbidden except that there is in it from God a trial and a decree."³⁶ "It is ineluctable that mankind should be purified, separated and sieved so that a great number is excluded by the sieve."³⁷ "You shall be purified in the way gold is purified."³⁸ "The greatness of man's reward goes with the greatness of suffering, and whenever God loved a people, He subjected them to suffering."³⁹

Divine trial is a purification which culminates with the effacement of the ego, that is, annihilation of selfhood and the transformation of human attributes into divine attributes. It is also called voluntary death (*al-mawt al-irādī*), as the following *ḥadīth qudsī* alludes, "He who seeks Me, finds Me; he who finds Me, comes to know Me; he who comes to know Me, loves Me; he who loves Me is enthralled by Me; he who is enthralled by Me, I am enthralled by him; he whom I am enthralled by, I kill him; he whom I kill, I owe him blood-money; he to whom I owe blood-money, I am his blood-money."⁴⁰

Just as God trains the soul through the names of majesty, He trains it through the names of beauty, as the Quran alludes, "He is the one who makes people laugh and weep" (Q 53:43). Since existence is circular, divine training must complete the circle of beauty and majesty. That is, just as God trains the soul through trial and hardship, so too must He train it through bounties and blessings. Without both types of training the wayfarer will not be complete and reach perfection. By extension, the *shaykh* trains the disciple through severity and hardship and through gentleness and kindness, but each according to his disposition and receptivity. This is because each person has a temperament governed by their natural elemental composition. Those whose character is stubborn are fire-like and change only through austerity and severity, like certain stones that melt only in severe heat. Those

35 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 2:259, no. 29.

36 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:152.

37 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 2:370, no. 2.

38 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1: no. 4.

39 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 2:255.

40 Mirzā Husayn Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasā'il* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1987), 18:419.

whose character is earth-like are soft and sandy. They do not benefit from intense heat, rather only a certain amount of severity and austerity is beneficial. Those whose nature is water-like flee from the austerity of their teachers. Those whose nature is like wind and oil are consumed by fire and their personality becomes effaced by severity.⁴¹

Both disciples and *shaykhs* have an individual relationship to the divine names, some being governed by the names of majesty and others by the names of beauty, while some combine both. Furthermore, disciples each have an orientation to the *shaykh*, like the parts of a single tree. Some are like the trunk, while others are the branches, leaves, fruits, and so on. Since training disciples is a complex and subtle affair that deals with all aspects of the soul's development and the path to God, the true *shaykh*—like a prophet—is God's vicegerent. If it were possible to find God without the divine teacher (*'ālim rabbānī*), Jesus would not have said to his disciple, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

During trials and hardship, one needs to take recourse in the *shaykh*. However, God's trial may come through the *shaykh* himself, and this is the most difficult type of trial. For example, the wayfarer may see something unbecoming of the *shaykh*, so his faith in him is tested. But as before, only the *shaykh* can remove doubts by distinguishing the divine and the human aspects of the *shaykh*. It may be that the perceived action is disapproved only in the disciple's eyes but not in God's. The disciple judges the act from his limited knowledge and intellect, but God knows its reality which is hidden from the disciple; and herein lies the test. In the Quran, Moses desired to learn from Khidr a certain type of hidden knowledge, Moses said to him, "May I follow you, so that you teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?" In Sufi lore, Khidr is considered the consummate *shaykh* who demands from his disciple (Moses) total submission with respect to the Unseen, namely, the knowledge of right guidance, but one that opposes convention. Thus, he says, "You will not be able to bear patiently with me" (Q 18:67). Had Moses maintained the etiquettes of discipleship, he would not have been dismissed as he was when Khidr exclaims, "This is the parting of our ways. I will explain to you what you could not bear patiently" (Q 18:78).

Finally, God tested not only for man but also the angels, as Imam 'Alī says,

If God wanted to create Adam from a light whose brilliance would dazzle the eyes, whose beauty would amaze the intellects and whose fragrance would take one's breath away, He could have done so. And, if He had done so, all would have bowed before him in humility and the trial of the angels would have been lighter. But God, the Glorified, tests His creatures by means of things the real nature of which they do not know, to distinguish them through the trial, remove arrogance and to keep them away from vanity.⁴²

41 Almajid, *The Law of Correspondence*, trans. Mukhtar H. Ali (London: Sage Press, 2021), 143.

42 Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, sermon 192.

Conclusion

The path to God is through knowledge and discipline of the soul. Although we identified seven distinct stations, it should be kept in mind that the human being is a single reality that manifests on various planes of existence, body, soul, heart, intellect, and spirit. There is a dynamic flow between the aspects of the soul, as there is between states and stations. Even if one reaches the tranquil soul—the first station of human perfection—it is possible to regress to previous stations or sink to the lowest station. Pure inerrancy belongs to God alone. Even prophets committed errors, if not sins, like our father Adam. The Quran says, “We had taken an oath earlier from Adam, but he forgot; he did not have resolve. . . . Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred” (Q 2:121). God created Adam with His “two hands” (Q 38:75), “taught Adam all the names” (Q 2:31), placed him on the earth as a vicegerent, and made him the proverbial *ka’ba* of angelic prostration; yet when God when tested him, he failed. Testing is God’s way (*sunna*), as nothing is attained in this world or the next without discipline, study, and examination. Thus, He says, “Do people think that they will be left to say, ‘We believe’ and not be tested? We tested those before them, so that God will know for certain the truthful from the liars” (Q 29:3–4).

References

- Abū Dāwūd. *Sunan*. Beirut: Dār al-Risāla al-‘Ālamiyya, 2009.
- al-‘Ajlūnī. *Kashf al-khafā’*. Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1968.
- ‘Alī b. Husayn (Zayn al-‘Ābidīn). *The Psalms of Islam*. Translated by William Chittick. London: Muhammadi Trust, 1988.
- al-Kulaynī. *al-Kāfi*. Tehran: Dār al-Uswa, 1997.
- Almajid, Akram. *The Law of Correspondence*. Translated by Mukhtar H. Ali. London: Sage Press, 2021.
- Almajid, Akram. *The New Creation*. Translated by Mukhtar H. Ali. London: Sage Press, 2022.
- al-Nasā’ī. *Sunan*. Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadāra, 2015.
- Āmidī, ‘Abd al-Wāhid. *Ghurur al-ḥikam wa-durar al-kalim*. Tehran: Daftar-i Nashr-i Farhang-i Islāmī, 2000.
- Āmulī, Ḥaydar. *Jāmi‘ al-asrār wa-manba‘ al-anwār*. Edited by Henry Corbin and Osman Yahya. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Ta’rīkh al-‘Arabī, 1969.
- Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid al-. *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1986.
- Huwayzī, ‘Abd ‘Alī b. Jum‘a. *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn*. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2001.
- Ibn Abī’l-Ḥadīd. *Sharh Nahj al-balāgha*. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A‘lamī li’l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1995.
- Ibn Bābawayh. *‘Ilal al-sharā’i’*. Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2006.
- Ibn Bābawayh. *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 2008.
- Ibn Bābawayh. *Ma‘ānī al-akhbār*. Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2009.
- Kāshānī, Muḥsin Fayḍ. *al-Ḥaqā’iq fī maḥāsīn al-akhlāq*. Qum: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 2002.
- Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir. *Bihār al-anwār*. Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1983.
- Makkī, Abū Ṭālib. *Qūt al-qulūb*. Beirut: Dār Kutub ‘Ilmiyya, 1997.
- Nūrī, Mīrzā Husayn. *Mustadrak al-wasā’il*. Beirut: Mu’assasat Āl al-Bayt li-Ihyā’ al-Turāth, 1987.

- Qayṣarī, Dāwūd al-. *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Edited by Ḥasanzada Āmulī. Qum: Bustān-i Kitāb, 2002.
- Qayṣarī, Dāwūd al-. *The Horizons of Being: The Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qayṣarī*. Translated by Mukhtar H. Ali. Leiden: Brill, 2020.
- al-Qushayrī. *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 2001.
- Raḍī, al-Sharīf al-. *Nahj al-balāgha*. Edited by Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ. Beirut: Dār Kutub al-Lubnānī, 2004.
- Rayshahrī, Muḥammad. *Mizān al-ḥikma*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001.