

The Fragrance of Faith

The Enlightened Heart of Islam

Jamal Rahman

THE BOOK FOUNDATION
BATH, ENGLAND

THE BOOK FOUNDATION

www.thebook.org

Copyright © 2004 Jamal Rahman.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Publication Design by Threshold Productions.

Cover Design by Kabir Helminski.

Special thanks to Talal and Nadia Zahid for their support.

First Book Foundation edition published 2004.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record of this book is available from The British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The fragrance of faith / by Jamal Rahman.

Bath, England: The Book Foundation, 2004.

ISBN 1-904510-08-6

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Islam. 2. Sufism

I. Jamal Rahman II. The Book Foundation



Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of my beloved parents, Ataur and Suraiya Rahman.

*O my Sustainer, Bestow Your grace upon them,
even as they cherished and nurtured me when I was but a child.*

[Sūrah Al-Isrā' 17:22-24]

Acknowledgments

All gratitude is to Allāh, Infinitely Compassionate and Merciful.

I am deeply indebted to:

- ❖ All my teachers for the generosity of their gifts and blessings.
- ❖ My beloved family, especially Kamal and Aysu, for their unconditional love.
- ❖ Barbara Trites for her consummate skills and lavishness of spirit in nursing this project from beginning to end.
- ❖ Karen Lindquist, Bill Bennett, and Katayoon Naficy for their steadfast and loving support.
- ❖ Rabbi Ted Falcon, Rev. Rodney Romney, and Father William Treacy for the sweetness of friendship and the beauty of shared commitment.
- ❖ Wayne Teasdale, Melissa West, and Denise Linn for their precious encouragement.
- ❖ Kabir and Camille Helminski for their vision and graciousness.
- ❖ Talal & Nadia Zahid, Hamida Battla for their kind support of intellectual work of this kind.
- ❖ Subhana Ansari for her kind and professional editorial assistance.
- ❖ And finally, to members of our growing Interfaith Community in Seattle whose genuine love, heartfelt challenges, and shared ideals have made me a better Muslim.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
WISDOM FROM PARENTS.....	9
Gratitude	9
The Real Work.....	12
Compassion	15
Inner Majesty.....	19
THREE PRINCIPLES OF ISLAM	
FIRST PRINCIPLE: SURRENDER	23
The Journey of <i>Islām</i>	23
Longing of the Soul.....	25
Two Veils.....	29
The Ego	31
The Nature of Ego	34
Patterns.....	35
Excuses.....	36
Fear	38
Attachments.....	40
Two Basic Laws.....	43
The Divine Exchange.....	46
SECOND PRINCIPLE: FAITH	49
<i>Īmān</i>	49
Experiences	51
Inner Teacher.....	54
THIRD PRINCIPLE: MORAL VIRTUE	58
<i>Ihsān</i>	58
Humility	61
Sincerity	64
Patience.....	66
Truthfulness.....	68

FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

FIRST PILLAR: PROFESSION OF FAITH	71
Introduction to the Profession of Faith	71
The <i>Shahādah</i> —Part 1	72
Mystery.....	73
The Face of Allāh	78
Larger Story	81
Closeness	84
Pleasure and Bliss	86
The <i>Shahādah</i> —Part II	89
Silence	93
Little by Little.....	98
Open Mind.....	100
Open Heart	104
Love	111
Two Realms.....	117
SECOND PILLAR: PRAYER	121
<i>Ṣalāt</i> and <i>Dhikr</i>	121
THIRD PILLAR: ALMSGIVING	128
<i>Zakāt</i> and <i>Ṣadaqāt</i>	128
FOURTH PILLAR: FASTING	132
<i>Ramaḍān</i>	132
FIFTH PILLAR: PILGRIMAGE	134
<i>Ḥajj</i>	134
WISDOM FROM PARENTS:	141
Flexibility.....	141
Journey Home	144
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	149
BIBLIOGRAPHY	159

Introduction

MY PARENTS have been my most precious teachers. They taught with love and caring the basics of the Islamic faith and conveyed the spirit of the tradition through example and by a special teaching.

This special teaching I refer to is a learning attained by contemplation on stories and verses. This simple method of teaching and learning is found in many traditions. The profoundest truth is sometimes best expressed by a teaching story or sacred verse that illuminates. Islamic mystics make prolific use of this technique.

Instinctively, a teacher knows which particular story or verse is needed for the student's inner work. Through this process of meditation on the verse or story, subtle shifts can occur within one's being. As one acts on this heart-felt understanding, i.e., begins to live it, one inevitably develops into a higher station.

*Once the blush of the Beloved
descends on you,
there is no going back
to being a green apple.*
(Traditional saying)

My father acquired his fondness for this technique from his father, Maulana Hedayatullah, a rural spiritual teacher and healer of Northern Bengal. Grandfather made an art form of this technique. He made extensive use of stories and verses in public sermons, healing sessions, and in conversations with intimates and students.

I never met my grandfather, but he is a formidable presence in my

life. Most of father's insights on Islām were attributed to my grandfather. Every few months grandfather "appeared" to him. Father never ceased to be astonished, refreshed, and deeply touched by this phenomenon. Everyone in our family felt a special affection and respect for grandfather.

Grandfather spent close to twenty years in intensive study and meditation in Northern India, in the conservative Islamic Deoband School, and later, with free-spirited teachers in other parts of India. Besides theology and mysticism, he also received extensive training in healing techniques. Upon return to his village home in Bengal as a scholar and healer, he was promptly offered the chair of Arabic and Persian studies in prestigious colleges in Calcutta, but he turned them down. He felt called to live and serve in villages.

The community in grandfather's village of Mahdipur built three rooms adjacent to his house to serve as an official school and a place for grandfather to offer guidance and healing to individuals. Grandfather conducted classes for a committed circle of students, usually under the shade of mango trees.

Grandmother was known in the village communities for her ability to heal through her compassionate gaze and tender touch. Even though publicly she stayed in the background because of social conservatism, in private she worked tirelessly in counseling, healing, and empowering scores of women who flocked to her. She was a source of immense support to grandfather; they worked remarkably well as a team.

The word "spaciousness" was very dear to grandfather and this word became an integral part of my parent's vocabulary and mind set.

"Without spaciousness of mind and heart it is difficult to comprehend the Qur^ʿān," insisted grandfather. "The Holy Book is difficult to grasp. How could it be otherwise?" Grandfather pointed out that in the Qur^ʿān, the Infinite is seeking expression through the limitations of language. It is as if the entire musical scale is being expressed through one note.

Commenting on the Qur^ʿān, a *ḥadīth* (a saying of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ) is that "its roots lie in the heart of man and its branches

or subtle meanings reach high into the sky of mystical knowledge.” None understands except “those who possess the inner heart” [*Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān* 3:7].

As a teenager, I delighted in the insight of the thirteenth-century Islamic saint, Jalālu’d-din Rūmī, that the Qur’ān is like a shy bride and rather than approach her directly, it is advisable to first bond with her friends, those who possess the inner heart. These are the sages who abound in Islām.

From an early age, I was fascinated by the universally-loved Rūmī. When his heart opened up and his being “burst through the seven worlds,” words of pearl-like wisdom and beauty flowed out of him. His scribes wrote them down over a period of years and compiled his utterances into books.

By the grace of God, some of my formative years were spent in countries where Rūmī is studied with awe and devotion: Iran and Turkey. This international traveling was possible because my father was a diplomat. Father was expected to live his life as a teacher and healer in the tradition of his ancestors, but he broke the pattern. He opted to serve in a different capacity. He joined the diplomatic service and went on to become Ambassador of Pakistan and later, after the country separated into two nation states, Ambassador of Bangladesh.

I was apprenticed to friends of my parents who explained to me that Rūmī had penetrated the mysteries of the Qur’ān. I was fascinated by these pious “teachers” who carried with them wherever they went a copy of the Qur’ān and the Mathnawī,¹ a book of sacred poetry by Rūmī. At night they deposited with great care the Qur’ān on the highest shelf of the house and gently placed the Mathnawī under their pillow. The tenderness of my teachers’ hearts and the sweetness of their devotion struck a deep chord in my heart.

I was taught verses of the Qur’ān and then invited to chant and

¹ The Mathnawī is a vast six-volume work of exquisite spiritual knowledge in the form of rhyming couplets written in Persian. Rūmī wrote only the first eighteen lines; the rest were dictated over a period of twelve years to his favorite scribe, Ḥusāmuddīn Chelebi.

meditate on selected poetry of Rūmī. Like millions of people, I felt unbounded adoration and veneration for Rūmī's insights which essentially are commentaries on the inner meanings of the Qur'ān.

From my mother I acquired a love of "Mullah Naṣruddīn" stories. The Mullah is a mythological and folklore character who is timeless and placeless, much like the Native American trickster, the coyote, in storytelling. Teachers regularly use Mullah stories to impart teachings.

The Mullah is a village idiot and sage rolled into one. It is said that because he does not aspire to be a teacher, he is truly a teacher. The Mullah is not unlike us, but he is also not like us.

Mother took great joy in planting Mullah stories that have "many levels of meaning" in our subconscious minds. When unexpected insights arose, mother delighted in what she called "blossoms and fruits."

My father and mother were remarkable teachers, deeply versed in Islām and possessed of the precious spaciousness that grandfather referred to repeatedly. They rooted their children in the teachings of Islām but encouraged us to nourish those roots by learning about other traditions. Growing up in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian countries, we visited mosques, temples, synagogues, and churches. My parents genuinely believed that a sincere appreciation of other faiths deepens and widens one's own inner faith. An appreciation of other traditions is not about conversion; it is about completion. Many times, especially in India, I heard Mahatma Gandhi's beautiful words often in our household: "It is a sacred duty of every individual to have an appreciative understanding of other religions."

When friends of father applauded him for being a modern Muslim, he replied that appreciation of other traditions is in the true spirit of Islām. The Qur'ān mentions that many prophets and religions came before the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ; "do not make any distinctions between them" [*Sūrah An-Nisā*⁷ 4:152]. When delegations of non-Muslims visited the Prophet Muḥammad, he invited them to conduct their services in the mosque for "it is a place consecrated to God."

The same friends were surprised to hear from mother that the

The Fragrance of Faith

Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ was a revolutionary when it came to advocating women's rights. Mother had much to say on this matter. In seventh-century Arabia, a strictly patriarchal society, the Prophet insisted that women receive property, inheritance, and divorce rights—something unthinkable for that period. Mother readily brought up the issue of the Prophet's marriages. For twenty-five years the Prophet was married to his beloved wife, Khadijah رضي الله عنها. Take note, said mother, that Khadijah was fifteen years the Prophet's senior and as a successful business lady, the Prophet's employer. "Is this not radical for any age?" asked mother. After Khadijah's death, the Prophet lived ten more years and in that time married several wives. Two of his wives were Jews and one Christian; all of his wives, save for one, were slaves, widows, or divorcees, considered discards in that community. The Prophet directed attention to the great need to break down social and cultural prejudices.

Mother minced no words in explaining that some so-called "Islamic" practices had their roots not in the Qur'ān but in male-dominated cultures. The veiling of women was a case in point. Another was the issue of a man marrying four wives in special circumstances. The Holy Book emphasizes that this is permissible only if the multiple marriage is just, fair, and most important of all, if the husband is able to divide his affection equally between his wives.² In *Sūrah An-Nisā'*, the Qur'ān clearly states that "you will never be able to deal equitably with all your wives, however much you want" [4:129]. If some men choose to avoid and flout this verse, it is to suit the convenience of the male ego.

Ultimately, it is the ego that needs to be worked on. Transformation of the ego is our life purpose. It is the untamed ego that tries to "possess" a religion or prophets. Spirituality cannot be roped or caged; prophets belong to no one and everyone. Every religion is humankind's heritage.

My parents frequently employed the metaphor of every religion being a flower in God's garden. Mother enchanted her guests by singing a poem by Tagore in Bengali:

² A woman does have the right to specify monogamy in her marriage contract, as did the granddaughter of the Prophet, Amīnah.

Jamal Rahman

*I came to offer You a flower
But You must have all my garden
It is Yours.³*

Three Principles and Five Pillars of Islām

Rūmī said of his lifelong study of the Qurʾān, “I have taken the marrow from the Qurʾān and thrown the bones to the dogs.” This was not meant to be disrespectful but to underline an essential point: it is paramount to absorb the essence of a tradition and live it and not be distracted by hair-splitting disputes.

Muslims traditionally receive guidance and inspiration from four sources: first, the Qurʾān; second, the collected sayings of the Prophet ﷺ and examples of his life (called *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*, respectively, and classed as one); third, resources in the community, e.g., the wisdom of elders and scholars; and fourth, individual reasoning.

I have chosen verses of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* to highlight the three principles and five pillars of Islām. I have then elaborated on them, drawing on the wisdom of Rūmī’s prose and poetry, teaching stories, and, finally, teachings of my family exemplified by grandfather.

The three principles of Islām are surrender, faith, and moral virtue. The five pillars are the profession of faith, prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage.

Arrangement of this Book

Spiritual teachers know the specific needs of their students. Not long before my parents passed away I asked them what were the most important teachings from the Qurʾān for me to focus on in my journey. They offered the following:

- ❖ Always be grateful.
- ❖ Do the real work.

³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Fireflies* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1955), p. 142.

The Fragrance of Faith

- ❖ Do this work with compassion and mercy for yourself.
- ❖ Remember that at your core, you are infused with the breath of God.
- ❖ Be flexible.
- ❖ Meditate on your death.

I start the book with four pieces of prescriptive wisdom from my parents followed by insights about the three principles and five pillars. I end with two more wisdom pieces chosen by my parents.

The stories, verses, and practices in this book are those that I personally have spent time with and cherish. My ardent wish in writing this book is to share something of the fragrance of Islām that my beloved parents spread wherever they went.

Please note that God, who is beyond gender, is variously invoked in this book as He, She, and It.

Throughout this book there are notations of numbers in brackets. These refer to chapter (*sūrah*) and verse (*āyah*) of the Qurʾān. The first time the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ is mentioned in a paragraph, his mention is followed by the symbol for “May the peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him.” The symbol ﷺ follows the first mention of other prophets in a paragraph, “Peace be upon him.” When Muḥammad’s companions are mentioned, they are followed with the symbol for “may Allāh be pleased with him” or “may Allāh be pleased with her.”

Jamal Rahman

WISDOM FROM PARENTS

1

Gratitude

*Whatever is in the heavens and on earth
extols the limitless glory of God*

[*Sūrah Al-Jumu'ah* 62:1]

ONE MORNING, the Mullah discovered, to his dismay, that his donkey had disappeared. His helper, companion, and source of livelihood had vanished! Frantically, he began to search. His neighbors joined in, looking in the hills and valleys, far and wide, but to no avail. The donkey was missing. At dusk, the neighbors turned back to give Mullah the sad news. They found him in the Town Square on his knees, hands stretched out, praising Allāh and exclaiming, “Thank you, Allāh! Thank you, Allāh!” Puzzled, the townsfolk asked the Mullah if he knew that his donkey was lost, maybe forever. “I know, I know,” beamed the Mullah. “But I have so much to be thankful for. Imagine what could have happened to me if I was on the donkey!”

The Mullah has tapped into a great secret of the Qurʾān: gratitude. In giving thanks, we are participating in life’s greatest mystery, the relationship of creation to Creator. The Qurʾān says there is nothing that does not proclaim the Creator’s praise. When our inner faculties are awakened, we hear melodies of constant praise in the swaying of branches, the rustle of leaves, and in the dignified stillness of earth and stones. The *ḥadīth* mentions that a bird, after sipping water, tilts its head heavenward not only for the water to flow through but for praise and thanks to flow heavenward!

In expressing gratitude, we humans take our place in the wheel of life. Our souls continuously and instinctively praise our Creator. Gratitude brings this expression of the soul into space and time.

When we are not grateful, we cover or hide God's blessings from us, and we fail to enjoy the link with the Creator that every moment provides. (Incidentally, the original meaning of "infidel" in Islām came from the Arabic *kufīr*: one who is "hidden" from God's blessings because of ingratitude.) When ungrateful, we are not able to experience enjoyment. To take things for granted is one of the greatest failings of human life.

Mullah Naṣruddīn announced a reward to anyone who found his lost donkey. The reward was his donkey! "Are you crazy?" the townsfolk asked the Mullah. "Not at all. You do not understand that the joy of recovering what was lost is greater than the joy of possessing it!"

Grandfather cultivated gratitude at every step. On Fridays, after noon prayers, he retired to his room for a half hour ritual. Eyes closed, hands on heart, grandfather melted into a trance. Softly, at times in silence, he intoned continuous words of heart-felt thanks to God. Interspersed with these words were recitations of Qur^ʿanic verses. At times his body swayed with his outpourings; other times he was still. Tears poured profusely down his cheeks soaking his shirt. Curious family members who secretly peeked in invariably burst into tears.

Knowing the power of gratitude, grandfather asked that we strive to be grateful even in times of affliction. When we hold gratitude in our hearts in difficult times, we are giving thanks for unknown blessings already on their way. Grandfather believed that besides compassion and awareness, gratitude is the other key available to us for unlocking the mysteries of the Universe.

Reflections

It is beyond me to express Thy praise.

Thine own praise of Thyself alone can express what Thou art.⁴

(*Hadith* of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ)

*For sixty years I have been forgetful, every minute,
but not for a second has this flowing toward me stopped or slowed.⁵*

(Rūmī)

Practices

- ❖ Make gratitude an integral part of your life. For example, before eating, make it a habit to send heartfelt thanks to grains, plants, fruits, and animals who sacrifice themselves for your nourishment. Upon arising and before sleep, make it a habit to say a prayer of thanks to your Creator. You can never overdo your expression of thanks to God.
- ❖ When you receive a gift, thank the giver and remember to hold gratitude for the Giver. If someone gave you a beautiful and expensive hat, wouldn't you be grateful to that person? But shouldn't you be even more grateful to the One who gave you the head on which to put the hat?⁶

⁴ Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (Oxford, England: One World Publication, 1996), p. 91.

⁵ Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, Mathnawī I:2084, in *Open Secret*, translated by John Moyne and Coleman Barks (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1984), p. 74.

⁶ A similar description of this insight appears in several traditions.

The Real Work

*On the earth are signs for those of inner certainty,
and also in your own selves. Will you not then see?*

[*Sūrah Adh-Dhāriyāt* 51:20-21]

UNDER A WELL-LIT streetlight, the beloved eighth-century saint Rābiʿa was engrossed in looking for a lost key. Soon her neighbors joined in the search, but without success. “Where did you drop it?” they asked, hoping to focus on that area. “Oh, I did not lose my key here but over there in my house,” replied Rābiʿa. Surprised and bemused, they respectfully asked why she did not look for the lost key in the house. “That is because my house is dimly lit, but out here it is so much brighter under the streetlight,” she explained.

The neighbors could not help laughing; they shook their heads in disbelief. This was Rābiʿa’s opportunity to impart a teaching. She addressed them: “Friends, it is clear that you’re intelligent. Then why is it that when you lose your peace of mind or happiness, perhaps because of a failed relationship or job, you look for what was lost out there and not in here?” Rābiʿa pointed to her chest. “Did you lose your joy out there or in here? Do you avoid looking inside you because the light is dimmer, and therefore, more inconvenient?” This insight struck a deep chord in her neighbors.

This story of Rābiʿa had supreme significance for my parents and grandparents. Spend time with the story, for it has exceptional powers, they insisted.

The Qurʾān remarks that “In time We shall make them fully under-

stand Our messages in the utmost horizons and within themselves” [*Sūrah Fuṣṣilat* 41:53]. Repeatedly the Holy Book asks, “Will you not see?” Several times the Qurʾān states that unless there is a change in our “inner selves,” there will be no change in outer conditions or in the flow of blessings from God [*Sūrah Al-Anfāl* 8:53, *Sūrah Ar-Raʿd* 13:11]. Reality is both outer (*zāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) [*Sūrah Al-Ḥadīd* 57:3].

To do our inner work is highly inconvenient, but to know who we are is our primary task. We need to confront who we really are. This work leads to unfolding from within, and it is necessary to usher in the fullness of our being. A common refrain of grandfather to his students was this reminder: to do the work is to become the work.

The Rābiʿa story, grandfather explained, is also about the inner meaning of *qiblah*. The word literally means “in the direction of” and relates to Islamic prayers. Five times a day Muslims prostrate in prayer in the direction of the Kaʿbah⁷ in Mecca. In prayer, the *qiblah* becomes the sacred direction.

In dealing with our issues and searching for solutions for life, may we focus our gaze and attention in the right direction. This sacred turning will happen when we apply ourselves to do what my parents called the “real work,” i.e., work on ourselves.

Reflections

*You know the value of every article of merchandise
but if you do not know the value of your own soul,
it's all foolishness.*⁸

(Rūmī)

⁷ This large cubic stone structure draped in black cloth stands in the center of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. In the Eastern corner of the cube is a black stone which legend says was brought down to earth by the Angel Gabriel. According to tradition, the foundation was laid by Adam ﷺ and the building constructed by Abraham ﷺ and Ishmael ﷺ. The Kaʿbah establishes the direction of prayer for all Muslims around the world.

⁸ Jalāluʿddin Rūmī, Mathnawī III:2652, in *Jewels of Remembrance*, versions by Camille and Kabir Helminski (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1996), p. 26.

Jamal Rahman

*The thing we tell of can never be found by seeking,
yet only seekers find it.⁹*

(Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī)

⁹ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, editor, *Travelling the Path of Love* (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 1995), p. 27.

Compassion

In the name of Allāh, Infinitely Compassionate, Infinitely Merciful

[*Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah* 1:1]

A *HADĪTH* says: “All that is in the revealed books is contained in the Qur’ān; all that is in the Qur’ān is contained in the opening *sūrah* (chapter) called *Fātiḥah*; all that is in the *Fātiḥah* is contained in the *Basmala*.” The formula by which God is invoked to bestow His benediction is the *Basmala*: “*Bismillāh-ir-Raḥmān-ir-Raḥīm*.” The words mean “In the name of Allāh, Infinitely Compassionate and Infinitely Merciful.” These words open every chapter of the Qur’ān save for one. God’s Compassion and Mercy are cited one hundred and ninety-two times in the Holy Book. Compassion and Mercy are the essence of God.

There is a deeper message in the *Basmala*, explained grandfather. He went to great lengths to explain the inner meaning of this verse: Allāh wants us to be compassionate with ourselves.

In doing this work of transformation, of giving birth to our real Self, grandfather repeatedly reminded everyone to be compassionate with themselves. “Can we learn to receive our pain with tenderness and love? Have mercy, for we are precious in God’s eyes. Little do we know who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Our beings deserve to be touched by compassion every step of the way.” Grandfather was emphatic on this point, “Whatever work you do on yourself, if you do not do it with compassion for yourself, you will not make much progress.”

Compassion was a mantra grandfather invoked unabashedly. While explaining a practice for inner development, he stopped in mid-sentence

and asked his students two questions, one followed quickly by the other. “Do this practice with what?” “With compassion,” the students would reply in chorus. “Compassion for whom?” “For myself, for myself,” the students joined in smiling and laughing.

To be compassionate with self does not mean that you avoid or deny what needs to be looked at and worked on in aspects of your personality. You do whatever is necessary, but with the energy of compassion and mercy. Grandfather explained what compassion meant to him. “Observe your personality with the eyes of the soul; work on what is necessary in your personality but with the qualities of your soul. The primary qualities of the soul are mercy, gentleness, and graciousness. The soul makes no judgment and is filled with unconditional love.”

Grandfather highlighted a simple point, “If I cannot be compassionate with myself, I cannot truly be compassionate with others. I might learn the mechanics of being kind and think I am merciful and loving, but that compassion is incomplete.”

Keep in Heart, Always

True compassion encompasses everyone, including the offender. Does this mean that the offender and the offense are excused and not dealt with? Not at all. You do what is necessary, but with qualities of the soul. Grandfather used a favorite insight, taught by his teachers, to explain: “Do what is right, but please do not shut the person out of your heart.” Follow this principle and you have tapped into the beauty and power of compassion.

When you are locked in a just combat with a wrongdoer, remember you are fighting the antagonism, not the antagonist. Do what is necessary, but do not banish the antagonist from your heart. For example, an honest judge presides over the trial of an offender. He does what is right: he sentences the man to life imprisonment. He can proclaim this sentence with contempt and disdain for this man, eager in his heart to banish this “scum of the earth” offender into oblivion. This is one energy. The judge can mete out the same sentence but with another energy, by not keeping

the offender's soul out of his heart. He reads the sentence with solemnity and respect. He makes sure that the offender is accorded his due dignities; he ensures he is not maltreated in prison. Maybe the judge even prays for the offender, sending light from his heart to the soul of the convicted person. So the same sentencing can be carried out with two different energies. One is from the ego; the other is from the soul. Compassion is energy from the soul that has the power to shift heaven and earth.

God as Compassion

Some say that God is so tenderhearted and overflowing with grace that if God could die for us, God would. This is impossible, so we have to die for God. This is the mystery of our journey. But know that God's exquisite and Infinite Compassion sustains us on every step of our path.

A *ḥadīth* says: "Whoever approaches Me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets Me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it."

The great saint Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī heard God's voice in a dream: "O Bāyazīd, I shall expose your spiritual infidelity to your followers, and they will stone you." Bāyazīd shot back, "O Beloved, if you do so, I shall expose Your tender heart and compassion, how forgiving You are when someone repents, the truth that your Mercy is infinitely greater than your Justice, and so no one who knows this will ever obey Your laws again." God became silent and relented.

If God is truly compassionate, why then does God not reveal Himself to us? Is it not cruel of God to hide His Face, causing doubt and dismay in this world? Wise teachers explain that the veils between us and God are necessary. If God's Beauty and unspeakable Majesty were to flare out in wave after wave of blinding lightning without veils, no one could endure them. Rūmī says that when God reveals His veiled Self to a mountain, the mountain laughs and is covered with grass, flowering trees, and rose bushes. These inebriate the birds and the mountain becomes a garden of birdsong. If God revealed Himself without veils, the mountains would dissolve into ashes and dust. So the veils between us and God enable God in

Jamal Rahman

Her tenderness and compassion to sustain and nourish us as we are.

Our basic nature is noble and deeply compassionate. If we do not know this, it is because we are unaware. We have not reached a state of wakefulness and so we sometimes act from states of fear rather than from knowing within us. Rūmī says that he who begrudges water to the thirsty is unaware of the mighty river flowing next to him.

As we soften the armor and defenses that we have built around the heart, we become aware of a divinely lit lamp in us. It is this flame of compassion and love in the heart that dissolves shadows within and without and illuminates the world.

Reflections

*How should Spring bring forth a garden on hard stone?
Become earth, that you may grow flowers of many colors.*

For you have been heart-breaking rock.

*Once, for the sake of experiment, be earth!*¹⁰

(Rūmī)

Practices

- ❖ Grandfather rejoiced in a practice in which he asked his students to add a word of endearment to their names and to make a lifelong habit of using that affectionate term with their names whenever talking to themselves. The truth is that we talk to ourselves very often and a lot of the talk is negative. Become aware of this internal conversation. Make it a practice to relate to yourself with affection and compassion.
- ❖ Grandfather called himself *Heda bhai* (*bhai* in Bengali means brother) and conversed with brother Heda quite often, with compassion, of course. This practice Grandfather claimed encourages one's divine identity to step forward.

¹⁰ Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, Mathnawī I:1911-1912, in *Rūmī Daylight*, versions by Camille and Kabir Helminski (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1999), p. 51.

Inner Majesty

It is He who has made you His representatives on earth

[*Sūrah Al-An‘ām* 6:165]

A SCHOLAR approached the Mullah and said, “I hear you know techniques that can give me revelations beyond what books and scriptures can impart.”

“Indeed it is so,” replied the Mullah, “but only on condition that you follow to the letter what I instruct.”

“Agreed!”

The first week’s assignment was to kneel in the marketplace three times daily, kiss the ground, grab his ears, and sing a particular song. The Mullah reassured the skeptical scholar that this would bring amazing revelations. A week later the scholar returned to report his progress. He was furious! Everyone in the market had roared with laughter and derision.

“I felt like a fool! A total, complete fool! An absolute fool!”

The Mullah exclaimed, “Wow! Fantastic! Marvelous! For just one week’s work, this is a profound revelation, wouldn’t you say?”

Indeed we are fools! We are far more than our personality; inside us resides resplendent Majesty, a sun more radiant than any sun we can imagine. But we have little idea of this.

The Qur’ān points out that God molded Adam¹¹ آدم and Eve from water and clay and out of Infinite Graciousness infused them with His Divine breath. All the angels save for one prostrated to the Divine Spirit

¹¹ Mentioned twenty-five times in the Qur’ān, Adam آدم is referred to twenty-one times as a collective noun, the “human”—a symbol for humanity.

in Adam and Eve. The Qur^ʿān says that the human being is *fiṭrah* (originally good and noble). Also, the human being is called *insān*, which has its roots in *uns*, meaning intimacy.

In the Islamic tradition, Adam ﷺ and Eve were banished to earth after committing transgressions in the garden of paradise. Adam and Eve begged for forgiveness. God out of Infinite Compassion readily forgave them and, furthermore, honored them. “We have fashioned you in the best of forms,” explains the Qur^ʿān [*Sūrah At-Tīn* 95:4] and even though humans are capable of “the lowest sin and folly” [*Sūrah At-Tīn* 95:5], Allāh has appointed Adam and Eve and their descendants to the exalted position of being viceroys of Allāh on earth.

The Holy Book tells humankind “We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains. They refused it and were afraid, yet man accepted it” [*Sūrah Al-Aḥzāb* 33:72]. The human being is blessed with Divine Spirit, is a bearer of the Trust, and a representative of God on earth.

*You surpass this world and the next in value.
What am I to do if you do not know your own worth?
Do not sell yourself short, for you are extremely precious.*¹²
(Rūmī)

Why do we not easily know our worth? How is it that we are so unaware of the incredible potential within us? Rūmī gives us some insights.

He states that, first of all, we tend to define ourselves outside of ourselves. We name ourselves by our outward appearances, such as our profession, bank account, etc. We miss the inward reality.

Secondly, we received our soul without much work or toil. How should a man or woman who inherits know the value of wealth?

*O so-and-so, you don't know the value of your own soul
because from His abundance, God gave it to you freely.*¹³

¹² Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, *Signs of the Unseen*, translated by William Thackston (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1994), pp. 16-17.

The Fragrance of Faith

(Rūmī)

Thirdly, awakening to who we really are is the purpose of life and the bewildering mystery of our journey: foredoomed to slumber so we might awaken; foredoomed to forget so we might remember.

Sooner or later we shall know our real self. How could it be otherwise? Inside, explains Rūmī, we breathe the fragrance of the Friend.¹⁴

Reflections

*You are a ruby in the midst of granite—
how long will you try to deceive us?
We can see the truth in your eyes –
so come, return
to the root of the root of your own self!*¹⁵
(Rūmī)

Practices

- ❖ When you encounter a difficult person, deal with the personality and do what is right. Protect yourself. But please be aware that he or she is more than personality. Can you restrain judgments, knowing that when you react in judgment, you risk criticizing the person's essence? You begin to judge the Grand Artist who made the person.

¹³ Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, Mathnawī VI:4209, in *Jewels of Remembrance*, versions by C. and K. Helminski, p. 187.

¹⁴ Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, *Love is a Stranger*, versions by Kabir Helminski (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1993), p. 80.

¹⁵ Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī 120, in *The Sufi Path of Love*, translated by William Chittick (Albany, NY: State University of NY Press, 1983), p. 339.

Jamal Rahman

Three Principles of Islam

FIRST PRINCIPLE: SURRENDER

5

The Journey of *Islām*

*The only religion in the sight of God
is self-surrender to Him*

[*Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān* 3:19]

THE JOURNEY of surrender is at the heart of *Islām*; the word *Islām* means to “surrender in peace.” The Qur’ān declares that the only true religion in the sight of God is self-surrender to Him. Muslims believe that to be a slave of Allāh is to be freed from slavery to the ego.

Surrender is the lifelong practice of listening to and acting on the needs of the soul, allowing the Divine and not the ego to be the center of Reality. Surrender becomes the soul’s dynamic role in the Will of God, giving up limited will to participate in Cosmic Will. This giving up is not a resignation, but a deep honoring of one’s real self.

*When you have set in the west,
then your light will rise from the east.*¹⁶

(Rūmī)

Grandfather was particularly eager to emphasize one central point: We cannot accomplish surrender by just saying, “O God, I surrender to You.” We must have something to surrender. Surrender requires a pre-

¹⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 193.

requisite.

Rūmī says, “Free will is the attempt to thank God for His beneficence.” We have work to do on ourselves, without which surrender is meaningless. This is the work of awareness, integration, and “seeking refuge in God.” “O sifter of the dust,” says Rūmī, “your intellect is in fragments, like bits of gold scattered over many matters. You must scrape them together, so the royal stamp can be pressed into you.”¹⁷

“It is important to understand,” grandfather explained, “that the work is not about destroying the ego. The ego cannot be eliminated, but it can be transmuted by expanding into a greater Light, a higher Will, a higher Intelligence.”

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ encapsulated the work involved in the journey of surrender in two of his celebrated sayings: “He who knows himself will know his Lord” and “Die before you die,” i.e., die to your ego before dying a physical death. Clearly, the work requires a lifetime of self-vigilance and spiritual practices.

First Step

The first step in the journey of surrender starts with a longing that boils up from within, an inner calling to go beyond the ego. In a *ḥadīth qudsī*,¹⁸ Allāh says: “Between Me and you there are no veils, but between you and Me there are seventy thousand veils.” In each of us lies an innate longing to travel beyond the ego and remove the veils between self and the Creator. It is the Allāh within us yearning for Allāh. When we acknowledge and embrace this mysterious and abiding ache, we become a seeker.

¹⁷ Jalālu’d-dīn Rūmī, Mathnawī IV:3287, in *The Essential Rūmī*, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 241.

¹⁸ The *ḥadīth* are divided into two groups: *qudsī* (sacred) and *sharīf* (noble). In the former, God Himself is speaking. The latter are the Prophet’s utterances and acts.

Longing of the Soul

I was a secret treasure and I longed to be known . . .

LIKE MILLIONS of Muslims, grandparents rhapsodized over an exquisite *ḥadīth qudsī* in which Allāh says:

*I was a secret Treasure
and I longed to be known
and so I created the worlds.*

The truth about this longing is that it is cosmically encoded in us. Essentially, it is a longing of the soul—a sigh from the heart of the seeker to the heart of the Beloved. It is a longing that drives the wanderer ever onward.

It is wise not to avoid, suppress, or bemoan this longing. There is sacredness to this ache. Honor the feeling and be present with it. Gently encompass it with your compassion and understanding. Follow the scent of its musk. It has the power to lead us out of our lives of quiet desperation and make seekers out of us. As we become travelers, magically, the Way appears.

In their lifetime, grandparents worked with hundreds of people who today would be diagnosed as suffering from clinical depression. Grandparents respected their sadness as having roots in something deeper.

Two things they did worked remarkably well. Grandparents received their pain with mercy, gentleness, and love. In silent empathy, they spent time with them, often holding hands and stroking their hair. Second, they

helped create for them authentic community—a circle of family members and friends who volunteered to be in regular touch with the depressed person. Members of the circle were responsible for nudging, persuading, and accompanying the depressed member into going for walks, doing breathing and physical exercises, and participating in spiritual practices.

Many of these depressed friends moved through their sadness. Some became spiritual adepts and a significant number volunteered to help others.

Majesty of Longing

Grandfather told stories of Ibrāhīm ben Adḥam to illustrate the beauty and power of this longing.

The mighty prince of eighth-century Balkh, Ibrāhīm ben Adḥam, possessed everything a person might want, but still felt an emptiness inside, an aching for something he knew not what. Relentlessly, he pursued his desires: feasting, gambling, womanizing, and hunting. Once while chasing a stag, he was separated from his retinue. In the heat of the hunt, the stag, a magical being, suddenly turned his head towards the prince and spoke, “O Ibrāhīm ben Adḥam, were you born for this?” and vanished! The words seared into the prince’s soul and stirred up deep questions in him.

Another time, as the prince gazed into a stately mirror, he saw himself walking towards a long, dark tomb, further and deeper, until finally in the presence of what he perceived was a just judge, again, the question was asked, “Were you born for this?” Something shifted deep inside of him.

In a third incident, the prince half-asleep, reclining on his couch, entertained the idea that maybe it was time in his life to explore spiritual matters. The prince fell asleep. Suddenly a series of loud thuds on the palace rooftop woke him up. Startled and confused he shouted, “Who’s up there? What’s going on?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” replied a voice from the rooftop. “Go back to sleep. I’m just looking for my lost camel.”

The Fragrance of Faith

“That’s absurd,” replied the prince, “How can you be searching for your camel on top of the roof?”

“O heedless one,” came the reply, “it’s no more absurd than you, dressed in silken pajamas, lying on a gold-sewn couch, searching for Truth.”

Ibrāhīm ben Adḥam was awakened. He was transformed. The prince gave up his kingdom and became a beggar, a servant of service begging for alms of mercy from God.

The story of the prince epitomizes a person who follows the fragrance of his longing musk and, in a visionary moment, gives up his external kingdom for inner majesty.

The journey of surrender starts with a longing, an abiding sigh from the soul that puts us on the path and gives us the strength to endure difficulties. It’s the same longing that prompts the salmon to use every ounce of its strength to swim upstream against a mighty river, intent on the spawning pools high in the mountains; a longing that leads birds to embark on the hazardous journey of their migration, thousands of miles away to their unknown destination. Sooner or later, this pull from within puts us on the Path. In the end, we tire of everything except the soul’s journey back to God.

*sultan, saint, pickpocket;
love has everyone by the ear
dragging us to God by secret ways*

*I never knew
that, God, too, desires us.¹⁹*

(Rūmī)

¹⁹ Vaughan-Lee, *Travelling the Path of Love*, p. 145.

Jamal Rahman

Reflections

*Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
how it sings of separation:
Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
my wail has caused men and women to weep.²⁰*
(Rūmī)

*The source of my grief and loneliness is deep in my breast.
This is a disease no doctor can cure.
Only union with the Friend can cure it.²¹*
(Rābi'ā)

²⁰ Jalālu'ddin Rūmī, *The Rūmī Collection*, selected and edited by Kabir Helminski (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1999), p. 145.

²¹ Vaughan-Lee, *Travelling the Path of Love*, p. 48.