

*The Fragrance of Faith*

# The Fragrance of Faith

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*These heart-felt reflections on the spiritual life of Islam are intended as an independent course or as a supplement to already existing courses on Islam, providing a light-hearted and practical approach to living a life of faith with self-awareness.*

*Too often instruction in Islam has focused exclusively on issues of outer behavior and beliefs. We feel it is equally important to provide a light that can illuminate the inner life.*

*Kabir Helminski, Editor*

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## 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 to choose for the student to do their inner work on. 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.*

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 and public sermons, healing sessions and in conversations with intimates and with students.

*The Fragrance of Faith*

I never met my grandfather but he is a formidable presence in my life. Most of father's insights on Islam were attributed to my grandfather. Every few months grandfather "appeared" to him. Father never ceased to be astonished, refreshed and deeply touched by this phenomena. 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 Quran," insisted grandfather. "The holy book is

difficult to grasp. How could it be otherwise?” Grandfather pointed out that in the Quran, 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 Quran, a Hadith says 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.”

As a teenager I delighted in the insight of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic saint, Jalaluddin Rumi, that the Quran 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 Islam.

From an early age I was fascinated by the universally loved Rumi. 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 book forms.

By the grace of God some of my formative years were spent in countries where Rumi 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 in training with friends of my parents who explained to me that Rumi had penetrated the mysteries of the Quran. I was fascinated by these pious “teachers” who carried with them wherever they went a copy of the Quran and the Masnavi, a book

of sacred poetry by Rumi. At night they deposited with great care the Quran on the highest shelf of the house and gently placed the Masnavi 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 Quran and, then, invited to chant and meditate on selected poetry of Rumi. Like millions of people, I felt unbounded adoration and veneration for Rumi's insights which essentially are commentaries on the inner meanings of the Quran.

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

The Mulla 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 Mulla is not unlike us, but he is also not like us.

Mother took great joy in planting Mulla stories which 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 Islam and possessed of the precious spaciousness that grandfather referred to repeatedly. They rooted their children in the teachings of Islam 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 repeated 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 Islam. The Quran mentions that many prophets and religions came before Prophet Mohammad and "do not make any distinctions between them." (4:152) When delegations of non-Muslims visited Prophet Mohammad, he always requested 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 Prophet Mohammad 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, Khadija. Take note, said mother, that Khadija 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 Khadija'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. By example the prophet demonstrated 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 Quran 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 wives agree and most important of all, if the husband is able to divide his affection equally between his wives. In a subsequent verse the Quran clearly states that “you will never be able to deal equitably with all your wives, however much you may want”. (4:129) If some men choose to avoid or flout this verse, it is to suit the conveniences 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:

*I came to offer thee a flower  
But thou must have all my garden  
It is Thine.*

### Three principles and five pillars of Islam

Rumi said of his lifelong study of the Quran, “I have taken the marrow from the Quran 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 Quran; second, collected sayings of the Prophet and examples of his life (called Hadith and Sunnah respectively and classed as one); third, resources in the community, e.g., wisdom of elders and scholars, and fourth, individual reasoning.

I have chosen verses of the Quran and Hadith to highlight the three principles and five pillars of Islam. I have then elaborated on them, drawing on the wisdom of Rumi's prose and poetry, teaching stories and, finally, teachings of my family exemplified by grandfather.

The three principles of Islam are: surrender, moral piety and faith. The five pillars are profession of faith, prayers, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage.

#### **Arrangement of 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 Quran for me to focus on in my journey. They offered the following:

- Always be grateful
- Do the real work
- Do this work with compassion and mercy for yourself
- Remember that at your core, you are divine
- 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 the 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 Islam 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 the book there

*The Fragrance of Faith*

are notations of numbers in brackets. This refers to chapters and verses of the Quran.

# 1

## Gratitude

*There is nothing that does not proclaim His  
praise. (62:1)*

One morning the Mulla 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 Mulla the sad news. They found him in the Town Square on his knees, hands stretched out, praising Allah and exclaiming, “Thank you, Allah! Thank you, Allah!” Puzzled, the townsfolk asked the Mulla if he knew that his donkey was lost, maybe forever. “I know, I know,” beamed the Mulla. “But I have so much to be thankful for. Imagine what could have happened to me if I was on the donkey!”

The Mulla has tapped into a great secret of the Quran: gratitude. In giving thanks, we are participating in life’s greatest mystery, the relationship of creation to Creator. The Quran 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 Hadith mentions that a bird, always 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 Islam from the Arabic "kufir" is one who is "hidden" from God's blessing 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.

Mulla Nasruddin announced a reward to anyone who would find his lost donkey. The reward was his donkey! "Are you crazy?," the townsfolk asked the Mulla. "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 Quranic 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

*O God, You know that I am not able to thank You  
According to all Your bounties  
Wherefore I pray to You, Thank Yourself for me.  
(Prayer)*

*For sixty years I have been forgetful  
But not once has this flowing towards me  
Stopped or slowed down.  
(Rumi)*

## Practices

- Make gratitude an integral part of your life. For example, before eating, make it a habit to send heart-felt thanks to grains, plants, fruits, 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 over do your expression of thanks to God.
- When you receive a gift, thank the giver and remember to hold gratitude for the Giver. If someone gifted you a beautiful and expensive hat, wouldn't you be grateful to the person? But shouldn't you be even more grateful to the One who gave you the head to put the hat on?

## 2

### The Real Work

*..... Will you not see? (51:15-23)*

Under a well-lit street light the beloved seventh century saint Rabia 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 Rabia. 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 head in disbelief. This was Rabia’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, say, because of a failed relationship or job, you look for what was lost out there and not in here?” Rabia 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 the neighbors.

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

The Quran remarks that “On the earth are signs for those of inner certainty as also in your own selves.” (41”53) Repeatedly the holy book asks, “Will you not see?” Several times the Quran 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. (8:53 and 13:11-15) Reality is both outer (Zahir) and inner (Batin). (57:3)

To do our inner work is highly inconvenient. But to know who we are and to do the work of unfolding from within so that we usher into the fullness of our being is a primary task. A common refrain of grandfather to his students was this reminder: To do the work is to become the work.

The Rabia 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 Kaaba 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.  
(Rumi)*

*That which you are looking for  
Can never be found by seeking,  
Yet, only the seeker finds.  
(Bayazid Bistami)*

### 3

## Compassion

### *In the name of Allah, Infinitely Compassionate, Infinitely Merciful*

The Hadith says: “All that is in the revealed books is contained in the Quran; all that is in the Quran is contained in the opening sura (chapter) called ‘Fatiha’; all that is in the Fatiha is contained in the ‘Basmala’. The formula by which God is invoked to bestow His benediction is the Basmala: “Bismillah – ir – Rahman – ir – Rahim”. The words mean “In the name of Allah, infinitely Compassionate and infinitely Merciful.” These words open every chapter of the Quran 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: Allah wants us to be compassionate with ourselves. Compassion for oneself was grandfather’s favorite subject.

In doing this work of transformation, of giving birth to our real Self, grandfather repeatedly reminded everyone to be compassionate with ourselves. “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 replied in chorus. “Compassion for who?” “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 judgement 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 the insight offered by the fifteenth century mystic, Kabir, 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 wrong doer, 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 tender hearted 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 verse from the Hadith 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 Bayazid Bistami heard God’s voice in a dream: “O, Bayazid, I shall expose your spiritual infidelity to your followers, and they will stone you.” Bayazid shot back, “O,

Beloved, if you do so, I shall expose your tender heart and compassion, of how forgiving you are when someone repents, of 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. Rumi 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 mountains become 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 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 and rather than knowing within us. Rumi says that he who begrudges water to the thirsty is unaware of the mighty river flowing next to him.

As we soften the armour 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 stones?  
Become earth that you may grow flowers of many colors  
For you have been a heart breaking rock.  
Once, for the sake of experiment, be earth.  
( Rumi)*

## **Practices**

- Grandfather rejoiced in a practice in which he asked his students to add a word of endearment to their names and make a life long habit of using that affectionate term with their names whenever talking to self. The truth is that we talk to ourselves very often. 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.

4

**Inner Majesty**

*It is He who has made you His representatives on earth (6:165)*

A scholar approached the Mulla 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 Mulla, “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 Mulla 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 Mulla 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 Quran points out that God molded Adam 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 in Adam and Eve. The Quran says that the human

being is “fitra” (originally good and noble.) Also the human being is called “insan” which has its roots in “uns”, meaning intimacy.

In the Islamic tradition, Adam 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 Quran and even though humans are capable of “the lowest sin and folly”, Allah has appointed Adam and Eve and their descendents to the exalted position of being viceroys of Allah 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, and man accepted it.” (33:72) The human being is blessed with Divine Spirit, is a bearer of the Trust and a representative of God on earth.

*You are more precious than Heaven and Earth.  
What more can I say? You know not your own worth.  
Don't sell yourself for so little a price,  
Being so precious in God's eyes.*

Why do we not easily know our worth? How is it that we are so unaware of the incredible potential within us? Rumi 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.*

Thirdly, to awaken 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 us, explains Rumi, we breathe the fragrance of the Friend.

## Reflections

*You are a ruby in the midst of granite.  
How long will you try to deceive us.  
We can see the look in your eyes.  
So come, return to the root of the root  
Of your own self.*

*(Rumi)*

## Practice

- 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 judgements knowing that when you react in judgement, you risk criticizing the person's essence. You begin to judge the Grand Artist who made the person.

5

## The Journey of Islam

*Say, the only true religion in the sight of God is self surrender to Him. (3:19)*

The journey of surrender is at the heart of Islam; the word Islam means to “surrender in peace.” The Quran declares that the only true religion in the sight of God is self surrender to Him. Muslims believe that to be a slave of Allah is to be freed from slavery to the ego.

Surrender is the life long 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 or repentance but a deep honoring of one’s real self.

*When you have set in the west  
Your light will rise from the east.*

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-requisite.

Day and night the Mulla prayed: “ O, Allah, please may I win the lottery.” After many years, Allah spoke: “Mulla, be at peace. You shall win the lottery! But do Me a favor. Be not so lazy. Take the step of buying at least one ticket!” This step of buying a ticket is a pre-requisite.

Buying a ticket symbolizes the work we have 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 Rumi, “Gather together your scattered fragments. How else will the royal seal be pressed on you?”

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

The Prophet Mohammad encapsulated the work involved in the journey of surrender in two of his celebrated sayings: “He who knows himself will know his Lord” and, second, “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 the Hadith, Allah 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 Allah within us yearning for Allah. When we acknowledge and embrace this mysterious and abiding ache, we become a seeker.

## 6

### Longing of the Soul

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

Like millions of Muslims, grandparents rhapsodized over an exquisite verse from the Hadith in which Allah 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. Secondly, 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 Ibrahim ben Adham to illustrate the beauty and power of this longing.

The mighty prince of eighth century Balkh, Ibrahim ben Adham, 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, Ibrahim ben Adham, 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.”

“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.”

Ibrahim ben Adham 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 the 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.  
(Rumi)*

## **Reflections**

*Listen to the reed flute  
How it wails and laments its separation  
From the reed bed  
Beneath everything we say or do  
In every note of the reed flute lies nostalgia  
For the reed bed.  
(Rumi)*

*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.  
(Rabia)*

7

## Two Veils

### *Health and Wealth*

The Mulla, as ferry captain, was privileged to have on board some learned and wealthy dignitaries – scholars, lawyers and business people. To pass the time they engaged the Mulla in conversation and egged him to talk about his favorite topics. They amused themselves watching the Mulla become animated as he talked of God, invisible realms and the need to polish the heart so that one is in a “fitting state to come into the presence of the Beloved.” Some in the group chuckled softly. These were people of science with little use for speculations and superstitions.

Presently, a storm arose. It grew worse. The boat began to toss and turn helplessly. All was lost, it appeared. Amazingly, many among the people of reason got on their knees imploring and pleading with God to save their lives. Promise after promise was offered – the kind of promises people make when desperate. The Mulla, calm and poised, walked between them and advised, “Friends! Friends! Now! Now! Steady! Don’t be reckless with your goods.”

Turning to the lawyers, he said, “Come on, drive a harder bargain”, to the business people, “Hey! What about the bottom line”, to the scholars, “Now, really, first do more research before making promises.” To all of them he declared, “And, yes, avoid entanglements as you have in your life so far.” Suddenly, the Mulla, peering in the distance shouted, “Ahoy! Ahoy! I see land!” The

story goes that the passengers got off their knees, celebrated and indeed avoided further entanglements.

Alas, says Rumi, there are two veils that may muffle our longing and obscure our sight of the path to self-realization: health and wealth. All other veils are offshoots of these two. Unless we are truly awake, these veils get in the way of our becoming seekers.

When our health is robust and rosy, we feel unshakable; when secure in wealth, power or circumstances, we feel indestructible. This may lull us into superficialities and stagnation. Any talk of invisible realms appears distant, irrelevant, even irritating at this time. But should the veil be torn apart because suddenly health suffers calamities or one's security dissolves, something awakens in us and we yearn for deeper meaning. We begin to seek help from a Higher Source. "Please help me," we plead, "I can't do this by myself."

May we awaken to deeper realizations in our life. May we become aware of our longing, greet the ache with understanding and compassion and allow it to make true human beings out of us. Praise! Praise to all early waking grievors, exclaims the Andalusian poet, Adi al-Riga:

*I was sleeping, and being comforted  
by a cool breeze,  
When suddenly a gray dove  
from a thicket sang and sobbed with longing,  
And reminded me of my own passion.*

*I had been away from my own soul so long,  
So late-sleeping,  
But that dove's crying  
Woke me and made me cry*

*The Fragrance of Faith*

*Praise to all early-waking grieverers.*

## 8

### The Ego

*He who knows himself will know his Lord*

The Quran tells us that there are three stages of nafs in the human. Nafs is loosely translated as the little self, ego, the “water and clay” part of us. Mainly through the work of self vigilance supported by spiritual practices, the nafs is transformed and surrenders to God.

The three stages of nafs are as follows: A self that inclines towards wrong doing, a self that is able to discern and make choices and a self that is at peace.

Self vigilance enables one to understand the nature of the ego and the trance states it holds us in. This vigilance combined with practices such as prayers and fasting dissolves the trance and allows one to submit to God and grasp “the most trustworthy handhold.” (31:22) One is then at peace knowing that “truly God’s guidance is the only guidance”. (6:71)

The practice of self vigilance is called “Muraqabah”, a word derived from the Divine name “Al-Raqib”, the Aware. The practice involves three elements: being present to one’s self, witnessing one’s self continuously and exercising compassion for one’s self.

Grandfather underlined the three elements of Muraqabah in his own unique way. To underscore the first element of being present, grandfather reminded his students of the saying: “A Muslim is a son or daughter of the present moment.” He explained the second element, witnessing, by borrowing a Vedic metaphor from

his Hindu friends: “We are like two birds sitting on the branch of a tree. One bird pecks away at the fruit of life. The fruit could be sweet or bitter. The other bird simply witnesses without judgement. Remember both birds are us, the participant and the witness.” Grandfather emphasized the third element i.e. compassion by saying that the first two elements are like pillars and the two pillars stand on the ground of compassion. “If the ground is shaky, the pillars will fall”, grandfather remarked. This was his way of underlining the need at all times for compassion towards self.

Work with the ego involves considerable exertion. In Islam this exertion is called “Jihad”. Surely this Jihad is holy, mystics claim, because if God wanted He could have put perfect beings on earth. Instead He sent ordinary humans like ourselves. To make exertions to know ourselves is a holy, mysterious task ordained by God.

The true human being, spiritual teacher like to say, makes exertion over one’s self; the superficial human being over other people’s ego. One must not be fooled into thinking that transmuting the ego is an easy task. Constantly, one has to be watchful and firm. The ego does not give up its center stage position easily.

By contemplating on simple stories one begins to understand the nature of one’s ego, its trance states and the importance of self vigilance. Self awareness unclasp the hold the ego has on us.

In the tradition of their forebearers, my parents delighted in telling us special stories about the ego to contemplate on.

## Reflections

*The Fragrance of Faith*

*May a wind from His garden  
Breathe to you this secret.  
It is not only I who am speaking here,  
But you, too, your own soul,  
Your own heart,  
Only for you are we ever apart.  
(Rumi)*

## **Practice**

- Observe yourself with kindness. With a vigilant but gentle eye, witness yourself at all times. Keep a journal. Note down what you discover about yourself. Shine the light of awareness on all parts of your personality. This practice of compassionate awareness and gentle witnessing is like a sun whose light dissolves shadows and gives life to what needs to flower and blossom in your being.

9

## Nature of Ego

### *Thank God I came along*

One moonlit night the Mulla, on one of his walks, peered into a well and was horrified to find that the moon had fallen into the bottom of the well. Eager to be of service to the world, he rushed home to get a rope. After tying a hook at one end, he flung the rope into the well. “Worry not, sister Moon,” cooed the Mulla encouragingly, “Succour is at hand.” The hook got hold of something. With all his might, the Mulla heaved and puffed, and as the hook loosened something, he fell on his back. He was now able to see the moon restored to its proper domain. He felt elated. “Thank God I came along,” said the Mulla to himself. “Imagine the consequences if I did not happen to pass by this particular well.”

### Reflections

The ego has a highly exaggerated opinion of itself.

## 10

### Patterns

#### *The cheese sandwich*

If there is one story that my grandparents and parents relished telling and hearing again and again, it has to be the story of the cheese sandwich.

During lunch break at work, the Mulla was getting exasperated. Every time he opened his lunchbox, it was a cheese sandwich. Day after day, week after week, it was the same – a cheese sandwich.

“I am getting sick and tired of this lousy cheese sandwich,” complained the Mulla repeatedly. His co-workers gave him some advice; “Mulla, you don’t have to suffer through a cheese sandwich over and over again. Tell your wife to make you something different.. Be firm with her if you have to.”

“But I’m not married,” replied the Mulla. By now, puzzled and confused, his colleagues asked, “Then who makes your sandwiches?” “Well, I do!” replied the Mulla.

#### **Practice**

With compassionate mindfulness become aware of the cheese sandwich patterns in your life that you might be stuck in.

## 11

### Excuses

*Who are you going to believe,  
me or the donkey!*

A neighbor knocked on the Mulla's door, asking to borrow his donkey. The Mulla was reluctant and so made up an excuse. "I'd like to, but someone else has already borrowed the animal." As luck would have it, just at that time the donkey began to bray. "But I hear the donkey!" exclaimed the neighbor. The Mulla, seeming indignant and offended, raised his voice, "Now, who are you going to believe, me or the donkey? And, yes, am I glad this came to pass. I could not, in any case, ever lend my donkey to someone with your mental disposition!"

Looking at our excuses we might be surprised at the lengths and breadths to which we go to cover half-truths. With painstaking complexity and creativity, we construct an intricate scaffolding of excuses to support our misalignments. This tendency to blame circumstances and other people creates lopsidedness in our personalities.

Some of our excuses are exotic. Mulla sneaked over a wall into a rich neighbor's garden and began to fill his sack with a variety of vegetables. The owner chanced to see the Mulla and ran over shouting, "What are you doing here?"

"I was blown over here by a high wind."

"And how come the vegetables are uprooted?"

"Well, Allah be praised, I was able to grab hold of them to prevent myself from being swept away."

“Then why are the vegetables in your sack?”

“Indeed, life is a mystery. That’s exactly what I was contemplating on before you so rudely interrupted me.”

Some of our excuses are falsely pious.

The Mulla was feasting himself on a huge roasted chicken. A beggar peering through the window implored the Mulla to share some of the chicken with him. “Gladly and willingly,” came the reply, “for I believe in sharing, but this chicken unfortunately belongs to my wife. My hands are tied. I am eating only because my wife has asked me to.”

In the next story, the Mulla is candid about his excuse. A neighbor dropped by to borrow the Mulla’s clothesline.

“Sorry, it’s in use at this time. We are drying wheat flour by putting it on the clothesline.”

“Drying flour on the clothesline! That must be a difficult task.”

“Far less difficult than you think if you don’t want to lend the clothesline!”

## **Practice**

- List your excuses and look at them gently. Notice how some excuses are filled with energy and creativity. They’re impressive! Know that a person with this much energy and creativity also has the capacity and potential to become enlightened. Only the direction needs changing.

## 12 Fear

### *What will happen tomorrow?*

A white cow lives on a green island and all day long eats the grass. At night-time the cow becomes thin as a blade with anxiety, “Oh my! What shall I eat tomorrow? I’m doomed.” Tomorrow comes; the grass has grown. The cow chomps and munches the grass in the day. Night comes and again the cow shakes with fear. “What will happen tomorrow?”

The story of the cow, says Rumi, is the story of our lives. Because we do not go beyond the frontiers of the ego and have little understanding of the power and grace of the Invisible, we live in a trance of fear.

Rumi continues: “You came from nowhere, from a sperm in the womb. Did you have any idea what roads you would take before you took them? Yet you have definitely arrived. In exactly the same way and with exactly the same mercy and mystery and strange providence, you will be brought to thousands of other worlds.”

When sensations of fear vibrate in us and we avoid and deny them, they grow. Darkness feeds them and in the shadows they assume frightening shapes that can overwhelm. Only in the light of awareness will the fear distortions melt.

Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something that needs our attention and love. Looking at our fears little by little and with compassion dissolves the trance.

## Reflections

*Do not be aggrieved by thought of sustenance*

*You will be sustained*

*Instead be steadfast*

*And frequent the Divine court.*

*(Rumi)*

## 13

### Attachments

*It's not the uphill or downhill;  
It's the load*

A saint who knew the language of animals asked a camel, “O ship of the desert, which is more difficult, uphill or downhill?” “O Seer,” came the reply, “It’s not the uphill or downhill. It’s the weight. It’s the load!”

In the ups and downs of life, it’s the burden of attachments to what the Quran calls the “tinsel of life”, that exhausts us. The proverbial bag we carry gets heavier and heavier and holding on to it is draining. We suffer.

The Quran laments that humans attempt to deny their mortality through incessant acquisitions. The holy book asks that we make exertions to understand the nature of desire in the nafs. (ego)

Grandfather told a story of the desire bowl of the ego; it was one of his favorites. A mighty emperor felt pity for an old beggar limping with a begging bowl outside his palace. The guards summoned the beggar inside.

“Old Man, name your desires. I feel moved to fulfill them,” commanded the Emperor.

“Only that Majesty upon High can do that. You cannot even fill my bowl,” replied the beggar, in reality a self-realized Master with a magical bowl.

Challenged, the Emperor ordered rubies and emeralds to be put into his bowl. Astonishingly, they vanished! Whatever riches

were heaped into the bowl, they simply disappeared. The bowl swallowed them up. In desperation, the Emperor asked, “What bowl is this?”

“This is the desire bowl of the ego, your Majesty, always desiring but never satisfied. This bowl swallows whatever is put into it. Understand this and you become an Emperor; otherwise, you become a beggar.”

### Catching monkeys

In the village of Madipur elders explain the consequences of clinging to our desires by describing a traditional way of catching monkeys.

In a hollow coconut, a small hole is carved through which food is put in, and the coconut is tied to a tree. The smell of the food attracts the monkey who, by straightening its fingers, manages to squeeze the hand in the hole. It clutches the food but is unable to bring out the enlarged fist. The hunters arrive; the monkey shrieks, jumps up and down, but not once does it think of letting go of the food. The monkey is caught! How comical and strange, we might think. But how quick are we to let go of our attachments? Because we do not, how many peculiar situations do we find ourselves in?

### Aversion and Craving

Know that aversion and craving are both attachments, two sides of the same coin. In a teaching story, Moses, on his way to talk to God, met a holy man who implored with him to ask God why, in spite of devoted practices day and night, he received so little results. On his return, Moses delivered the message from God, “It’s your beard!”

“But of course,” exclaimed the holy man, “How true! For half my time I spend trimming and making beautiful my beard and every two hours I keep looking at my beard in my little pocket mirror. From now on, I am resolved to remove this obstacle.” Henceforth, every time a hair or stubble appeared on his face, with fervor, immediacy and determination, he plucked it out. No longer would the beard be a barrier between him and the Light. Years passed. No enlightenment. Anxiously, the servant of God awaited the reply from his Creator. Moses delivered the answer: “It’s your beard!” The practitioner of Truth got it this time! First it was his obsessive love of his beard, and now it was the obsessive harshness with his beard. Both are obstacles. In that instant, the holy person let go and became filled with light.

### **Practice**

- When you feel overly attached to something or someone, image the story of the monkey with its fist in the hollow coconut, not willing to let go of the food. Feel the absurdity of this tightness and the consequences of it.

## 14

### Two Basic Laws

*Is it not enough that your Sustainer is a witness?  
(41:53)*

My father shared with me two basic laws which he thought were critical for me to be comfortable with. Accepting the two laws is a litmus test of progress made in knowing one's ego. By embracing the two laws, the ego is no longer a "commanding master" and surrender to God becomes easier.

#### First basic law

The first law states that whose ever approval you seek, to them you become imprisoned. This is a law of the created world.

My father impressed on me that it was truly important to ponder on this insight. When he felt that I had embraced this insight, he provided commentary that had been repeated for centuries: "Simply choose your jailers with care and deliberation." The Quran says "If one desires the rewards of this world, let him remember that with God are the rewards of both this world and the life to come. (4:134)

Father rejoiced in telling the story of Tansen. In South Asia, the name of Tansen evokes awe. This master musician, in the court of the mighty Mughal emperor Akbar of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, possessed a voice of unimaginable beauty. When he sang, legend says, angels danced and trees and flowers bowed in sweet respect. Emperor Akbar was determined to meet the master who taught Tansen to sing like this. On the way to the mountain cave where the teacher

lived, the emperor heard the master sing. The emperor swooned into unconsciousness. When he came to, he exclaimed, “Tansen! Tansen! Your voice is magical. But what I heard today is the music of the spheres! It is divine! Can you not sing like that? What gives your master’s voice that unspeakable uniqueness?” Tansen replied, “Your majesty, it’s simple. I sing for you. My master sings for that supreme Majesty, the Emperor of all Emperors. That is what gives his voice that enchanting quality.”

The beauty of what we say and do comes from singing to the highest and deepest in us.

#### **Second basic law**

The second law states that whatever you say or do, some will praise and some will blame. Can you come to terms with this law? My father encouraged me to contemplate deeply on a Quranic verse: “Is it not enough that your Sustainer is a witness?”

The second law is reflected in the well known Mulla story. Mulla, his grandson and donkey ambled through the marketplace on their way home. The Mulla overheard a conversation: “Look, two travelers and a beast of burden, yet they insist on tiring themselves out.” Immediately, the Mulla perched himself on the donkey. Down the road, there were more murmurs. “Look! Any wonder why the younger generation turns out disgruntled and disrespectful. That man on the donkey looks old enough to be wise in years but he lets that boy, tender in age, and fragile in body, suffer so.” Instantly, the Mulla got off and put the grandson on the beast of burden. Further in the marketplace, more muted conversations: “Look! A perfectly robust boy enthroned on the donkey while his grandfather shuffles painfully under the searing sun! How we spoil our young ones and later ask, “What did we do wrong?” This time, both the Mulla and the grandson embarked on

the donkey. More whispers: “No wonder life is harsh. The heavens punish us for the way we abuse Allah’s dumb creatures. Silently that poor donkey suffers under the burden of the young and old.” Quickly, grandfather and grandson disembarked, lifted the donkey, balanced him on their shoulders and started walking. Down the road came scornful laughter.

The more you become immersed in the higher self, the less you are enslaved to what others may think. You relate directly to the world’s Beloved and not to the world’s opinion.

## Reflections

*I want to sing like birds sing,  
Not worrying who hears  
Or what they think.  
(Rumi)*

## Practice

- Ask yourself: In my life whose approval do I seek? Then, choose your jailors with care and deliberation.
- Remind yourself that no matter what you say or do, some will praise and some will blame. Accept the law.

## 15

### The Divine Exchange

#### *Die before you die*

In a time honoured story, God comes down to earth in the guise of a beggar and pleads with two men for coins. One reluctantly gives a measly coin, the other, several coins. The beggar transmutes the coins into gold and returns them to the astonished men. God can only give back to you what you are willing to give Him. What we offer God is primarily the work we have done on ourselves.

To die to the ego is about a divine exchange: We give up attachment to our little self in exchange for the Higher Self; we make a commitment to be attentive to the desire of the Beloved and not the ego. To die to one's ego is not just a struggle on one level but an opening to a higher level.

This commitment to the Beloved was already made by our souls in those eternal realms. The Quran talks about "Alast, the primordial covenant between God and humankind as yet unborn, i.e. before souls descended to earth in the form of humans. God asked, "Am I not your Lord?" Our souls responded, "Yes! Yes! We witness it." Thus we had surrendered our soul to the Beloved before our creation. Our work on earth is to bring this state of surrender into consciousness and to live it.

We reach a stage in our life where the following words of the Quran resonate deep inside of us:

*Say, O my Lord, my sacrifice, my prayers,  
my living and my dying are for God,*

*the Lord of the worlds who hath no peer. (6:162-163)*

What an amazing exchange surrender is! “Who indeed should be so fortunate,” exclaims Rumi. “A Sea wooing a drop! In God’s name, sell and buy at once. Give a drop and take this Sea full of pearls.”

*Where can you find a market like this  
Where with your one rose  
You can buy hundreds of rose gardens  
For one weak breath, the divine wind!*

In the process of this divine exchange comes a deep knowing that God is lovingly mindful of our minutest needs and that we are the obstacles in the way. Less and less do we feel the need for control as we relax into the embrace of God and feel a peace that is indescribable.

In the Hadith Allah says of his adorer in this state of submission: “I become his ears with which he hears, his eye with which he sees, his hands with which he grasps and his foot with which he walks.”

## **Reflections**

*It suits the generous man to give money  
But truly the generosity of the lover  
Is to surrender his soul  
If you give bread for God’s sake  
You will be given bread in return  
If you give your life for God’s sake  
You will be given life in return  
(Rumi)*

*This is how I die  
Into my love for you*

*Like clouds dissolving  
Into the Sunlight  
(Rumi)*

## **Practices**

- In clear, practical terms grandfather elaborated on the practice that was an essential part of surrender to be done for a lifetime: Make it a habit in everything you say or do to ask yourself, “Does my speech or action derive from a place of divine attributes within me - truth, love, compassion, beauty? Or do they spring from a place of the little self in me - fear, pettiness, jealousy?” Be mindful of the question and make conscious efforts to originate from your soul. No matter how inconvenient choose to honour your “soul need.” The Light takes care of the obstacles. Have faith.

Grandfather was quick to point out that if you lapse and succumb to a petty or selfish impulse in you, remember to be merciful with yourself and be utterly hopeful. The Universe lovingly provides a stream of opportunities to help you connect with your soul.

## 16

### Ihsan

#### *Bring to God a sound heart (26:89)*

The Quran remarks, “Children of Adam! He bestowed garment upon you to cover your shame, adornments pleasing to the eye. But the garment of piety is the finest.” (7:26) We are asked to develop “Ihsan” which means moral virtue or purity.

For all that we receive again and again from the “Infinite bounty of God” (8:29), what can we offer in return? The Quran advises: “Bring to God a sound heart.”

Queen Sheba felt indebted to King Solomon. She sent him mule load after mule load of glittering gold. Her envoys were stunned to find that even the streets of King Solomon’s kingdom were paved with gold! “All I really wanted,” said King Solomon, “is a heart of gold.”

In the Islamic holy book, the Biblical Joseph is a symbol of nobility, knowledge, and beauty. After the family’s historic reconciliation, one of Joseph’s brothers asked what he could possibly bring him as a gift that would be worthy of his perfection. Joseph replied that the answer would come in a dream. The next day the brother, visited by a vision, brought the gift of a pocket mirror to Joseph and said, “This is all I can offer you, a mirror, so that by gazing into it you may see the perfection of your beauty.”

Purify your being so you reflect in you the loveliness of your Creator. As you cleanse yourself, your being is pierced by a sweet, divine light. A light from within rises and a light from the heavens descends, enveloping you with what the Quran describes

in a celebrated verse as “Light upon Light.” (24:35) Rumi explains that the ascendance of man becomes the descendance of God.

### **Chilla**

Adjacent to the mosque in Mahdipur, grandfather constructed two small rooms. The rooms served as space for students and friends to engage in exercises of purification. In a practice called Chilla (inspired by the prophet’s habit of spending time in silence in the caves of Mecca), the practitioner cloistered himself in the room for ten to forty days and nights immersed in prayer, meditation, readings, self-introspection, and silence. The practitioner ate sparingly from a meal provided once a day.

Some evenings grandfather visited to advise about issues which cropped up, to interpret dreams, prescribe specific meditations and recitations. At the end of the purification period, in a sacred ceremony marked by silence, grandfather and other students greeted the practitioner by embracing him. Bystanders jostled to be as close as possible in order to catch a glimpse of the indescribable glow coming from the practitioner’s face.

## **Reflections**

*The flame met the earthen lamp in me  
And what a great marvel of light!  
(Tagore)*

*The noblest of deeds is simply this:  
that the devotee purify himself of the notion of his own purity.  
(Tustari)*

## **Practice**

The prophet explained how best to practice moral piety: Act and speak in this world as though you are seeing God and if you cannot see God, know that God sees you.

## 17

### Humility

*Truly life is hard save for the humble minded  
(2:45-46)*

The saint Bayazid Bistami, deep in meditation, experienced a wondrous vision. He was transported into celestial realms and was ushered into the place where God's Throne sits. All around were angels singing praises of Divinity and circling the seat of God. Utterly awed and overwhelmed the saint mumbled, "How indescribably fortunate and blessed that God sits here with you!"

A voice emanating from the Throne replied, "How amazing! We are told that God dwells in pure and humble hearts."

Practice humility, say the elders, and you begin to connect with an indwelling Divinity within you. The practice of humility is about dissolving self-centeredness. The person who has traveled beyond self-centeredness realizes he is nothing and yet is not separate from Divinity. One bows lower and lower to the mystery and beauty of this paradox. This bowing brings him or her true dignity.

Have you not noticed, asks the Quran, that all things that God has created "cast their shadows to the right and left, bowing themselves before God in all humility." (16:48-50) "Do not walk proudly on earth" cautions the holy book, "You cannot cleave the earth nor can you rival the mountains in stature. (17:37) The beloved of God are those who "walk the earth in humility" and when the ignorant address them they say "peace." (125:61-64)

They are aware that “truly life is hard save for the humble minded”.

The Quran encourages every Muslim to engage in prayers so that through the postures of bowing and prostrating to God one inculcates the precious quality of humility (khushu) inside of us. “Call upon your Lord humbly and secretly,” advises the Quran. (7:54)

Spiritual masters make an interesting observation about humility: bowing down is not about appearances but about essence. Humility does not mandate a specific demeanor, posture, tone of voice, or choice of words. Humility is about an internal shift.

A famous Sheikh contemplated on some verses of the Quran and was deeply touched. He raised his hands to the heavens crying out, “O God, truly Yours is the Glory! I am nothing! I am nothing!” His senior disciple who was with him in the mosque felt deeply inspired by this act of humility. Together with his Sheikh, they began prostrating and rolling on the floor of the mosque wailing, “O God, I am nothing! I am nothing!”

A beggar who was passing by was affected by this. Very soon he was also on the floor crying out, “I am nothing! I am nothing!” The Sheikh noticing the beggar, nudged his disciple in the midst of the outpourings and said, “Look! Just look at that! Just see who thinks he is nothing!”

## **Reflections**

*Who humbles himself  
Like the earth under him.  
Receives the cover of mercy  
Like the sky over him.  
(Traditional saying)*

## 18

### Sincerity

*For the sincere...is an appointed nourishment  
(37:40-46)*

The Quran tells the story of Jesus who in his youth made birds out of clay. When he graced them with his breath, the birds came to life and flew away. The miracle was possible because Jesus breathed into the birds his heart's sincerity. Sincerity has the power to move heaven and earth.

Grandfather enjoyed unusual success in praying for rain showers to descend in areas of Northern Bengal where the lands were parched and scorched. His techniques were studied extensively by the serious and curious. People noticed that when he walked onto the lands and prayed for rain, his palms were turned downward. However, as he later explained, the technique of palms had nothing to do with the rains; in fact he had no remembrance of the palms turning.

Two elements, he stressed, were of profound importance. Prior to the ritual of walking the lands and praying, he immersed himself in prayers, meditations, and fasting. Purification of the being was essential. Secondly, when praying for rain, he soaked his words in the deepest sincerity and humility. He found himself connecting with the vibration of an anguished cry pouring forth from the core of his being, from his soul, rising upwards higher and higher, begging, imploring for rain. And it was the sincerity of this anguished prayer from those mysterious depths, grandfather said,

that at times opened up the heavens and brought down life giving waters.

### Spaciousness

Grandfather used the word “spaciousness” in explaining sincerity. There is sincerity of the personality and sincerity of the soul, depending on our spaciousness.

To religious fundamentalists who claimed sincerity in forcibly “helping” and “saving” others, grandfather told a simple story. There was a sincere monkey who insisted on rescuing fish from a neighborhood pond by plucking them out of the water in order to save them from a watery grave! This is an example of sincerity where spaciousness is limited.

As a person’s personality becomes more aligned with the soul, the personality expands beyond its conditioned prejudices and imperfections. Such a person embodies spaciousness, and is considered spiritually mature. The sincerity of such a being has heaven like powers and is promised heavenly delights. The Quran says that for the sincere “is an appointed nourishment: fruits and honor and dignity in gardens of felicity”.

## Reflection

*Sincerity is that whereby God is desired  
whatever the act may be.  
(Al-Junayd)*

## Practices

Ask yourself:

- Do my words match my intentions?
- Do my actions reflect my beliefs?

*The Fragrance of Faith*

- In presenting myself to others, is it my mask or my real face I am putting forward?  
Sincerely and gently align yourself to the truth of who you really are. Your real face is beautiful; at your core, you are holy.

## 19

### Patience

*Allah is with those who patiently persevere (2:153)*

A Hadith remarks that patience is half of faith, a jewel among jewels. Patience is the most frequently mentioned attribute of Allah in the Quran.

Two beggars knocked on the door asking for bread. One beggar was given a loaf and sent away. The other was kept waiting and waiting. At length, the second beggar became concerned. “Why am I being denied? What is so lacking in me that the other one was favored over me?” he asked himself. Unknown to the beggar a fresh loaf was being baked for him inside the house.

The Quran repeatedly invokes patience. In the face of obstacles and difficulties, the prophet is asked to be patient. If those who are unjust are allowed for a time to prosper, it is because God is patient. Humans are told to keep the faith and walk the path of justice and peace. Know that Allah is with those who patiently persevere. “Wisdom and power follow endurance and patience,” says a Hadith.

Patience has three components. The first is the art of mindfulness that asks you to be present with whatever is. Can you be like the hen sitting on the egg present with the rhythms of nature?

The second component is a development of gentleness in you. Can you be less aggressive? Rushing ahead to clutch a floating feather will drive it further away. Turning on a powerful hose to fill

up a small cup is an exercise in futility. But if you are present and gentle, the feather will be in your grasp and the cup will fill.

The third component, a most critical one, is the faith that there is a God who is infinitely Compassionate, Merciful and Just; a God who is aware of our minutest needs and graciously provides.

A man stood before the saint Shibli and said to him, “Which act of patience is hardest for one who is patient?”

Shibli said, “Patience in God.”

“No,” the man said.

Shibli said, “Patience for God.”

“No,” he said.

Shibli grew angry and said, “Damn you, what then?”

The man said, “Patience without God Most High.”

Shibli let out a scream that nearly tore apart his spirit.

Although impatience can embroil us in difficulties and absurdities, it is wise to be compassionate with the impatience we feel is us. Grandfather put forth a charming hypothesis why we need to be gentle with ourselves. When impatient, we are possibly tapping into a subconscious memory of the time when we were in those divine realms before we arrived here. In those dimensions, whatever we thought of manifested instantly! On this plane of reality we forget that we have to mature into higher states of being before any of that is possible. Thus, be gentle with yourself.

## **Reflection**

*The patience shown by the moon to the dark night  
Keeps it illumined.*

*The patience shown by the rose to the thorn  
Keeps it fragrant.*

*The Fragrance of Faith*

*(Rumi)*

## 20

### Truthfulness

#### *God is Ultimate Truth (22:5)*

When prophet Mohammad preached that God is One, many Meccans were infuriated. In the beginning they ridiculed him. Then they made threats and later persecuted him. Because these methods failed, some prominent Meccans tried to bribe him. The prophet declared: “Even if you put the Sun in my right hand and the Moon in my left hand, I shall never waver from the Truth.”

Our souls have a passion for truth. Our aspiration for truth is God longing for God. A passionate commitment for truth is the way and the goal. Seeking truth is not about accumulating knowledge but about awakening to the heart of Reality – by living and becoming truth.

Islamic saints say there are three levels to awakening to truth. They use the metaphor of fire. The first level is to hear about fire, the second, to witness fire and the third, to burn in the fire. The highest truth is that which we have experienced ourselves.

In the pursuit of truth, once again grandfather used the word spaciousness. Cultivate a sense of openness about your truth. Allow your truth to breathe. Don't suffocate it with your ego hold. “Beware,” grandfather cautioned, “you are not honouring truth; you are honouring your ego.”

A disciple approached his teacher to give him exciting news. A non-Muslim with whom he had spent time was showing interest in converting to Islam. To his surprise his teacher

responded, “All this does is inflate your Islamic ego. Don’t be so easily distracted. Focus on your real work.”

To another student who was furious because someone criticized his religion, the teacher explained that Islam is as spacious as the sky. If someone spits at the sky, does it stain the sky? In fact, the spit returns to the person. It’s not religion that is bruised but one’s ego.

One of Grandfather’s favorite Hadith’s that he meditated on often and did his best to live, was as follows:

*If a man gives up quarrelling when he is in the wrong,*

*A house will be built for him in Paradise.*

*But if a man gives up a conflict even when he is in the right,*

*A house will be built for him in the loftiest of Paradise.*

Reflect upon the truth and live it. This pleases your Creator. The Quran says, “Aren’t you aware how God sets forth the likeness of a good word? It is firmly rooted like a good tree, its branches reaching toward the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by the permission of its Sustainer.” (14:24)

## Reflections

*A self-righteous person sees someone lie  
And the flames of anger rise up in him  
He calls that hellish pride defense of the Truth  
He doesn’t notice his own arrogant soul  
(Rumi)*

## Practice

*The Fragrance of Faith*

- Make a list of people to whom you have lied. Silently, in your mind, talk to them. Tell them the truth and from your heart ask for forgiveness. Then with mercy and sacredness, forgive yourself.

## 21

### Iman

*...a light by which you shall walk (57:28)*

The Quran says that God has faith in man. The way of man is to be worthy of that faith (called “iman” in the holy book).

When Adam was being created by God, the angels were hesitant for “he will spill blood and mischief in the land.” God replied, “I know what you do not know.” (2:30-31) Out of Infinite Graciousness God breathed His spirit into Adam and Eve. As part of a Divine plan, God appointed humankind as “Abd” and “Khalifa”, servant and vice-regent of God, respectively.

In the astonishing mystery of our existence and our journey on earth, our lives are filled with paradoxes, bewilderment and doubt. The Quran says, “By the token of time, verily humankind is in loss.” (103:3) A Muslim needs to build faith in God, His angels, His revelations, His apostles and the last day - the day of Judgement.

“Trust Allah”, counsels the Quran. The holy book says, “If Allah is your protector, none can overcome you and if He forsakes you, then who can help you?” (3:160) Know that the cultivation of faith provides a light by which you shall walk.

Grandfather stressed the importance of being a “mu’min”. One who is obedient to God’s laws is a Muslim, but one who has the deep inner certainty of faith is a mu’min. This inner certainty of faith or “iman” has to build up from within. The Prophet said, “Iman is confession with the tongue, a verification with the heart, and action of the body.”

Muslims are advised to pray, recite the Quran regularly, and be in the company of those “who are in awe of God”. These practices help one develop faith. In addition to these practices, grandfather emphasized two more facets of faith-building to his students: have your own experience of Truth and, second, develop a relationship with your inner teacher.

In his youth grandfather had left his village for several years to study at an Islamic divinity school in northern India and later to continue his learning with some well known spiritual teachers. He was grateful for the learning but realized that his inner certainty came not so much from the school or teachers but really more from his personal experiences along the way.

Grandfather was convinced that the greatest spiritual teacher resided within one’s self. It was necessary to seek out teachers who could help one connect with one’s inner teacher and grow an inner faith.

## **Reflections**

*Faith is the bird  
That feels the light  
And sings  
While the dawn is still dark.  
(Tagore)*

## 22

### Experiences

#### *He who tastes, knows*

A friend called on the Mulla bringing with him a few ducks he had hunted in the wild. Together, they prepared a large pot of delicious duck soup and enjoyed a hearty meal. Next day the Mulla received a visitor, a “friend of the friend who brought you the duck.” The Mulla fed him duck soup. The following day another visitor arrived, calling himself, “friend of the friend of the friend who gifted you the ducks.” The Mulla graciously gave them duck soup. The subsequent day another caller, “a friend of the friend of the friend of the friend” dropped by. The Mulla seated him and brought him a bowl of hot water. Eagerly, the guest tasted the soup, then exclaimed in disappointment, “What is this? This is no duck soup.” “Yes, it is,” insisted the host. “This is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck!”

Most of our rigidly held beliefs are a watered down “soup of the soup” version of Reality. They do not rise up from within us. We borrow from someone else’s beliefs and hearsay. We abide in what Rumi calls “borrowed certainty.”

However sacred our authoritative the writings of holy books, it is one’s deepest experience of them that is the ultimate truth. Deepening of faith requires participation of our beings; it requires the engagement of our mind and heart. Faith cannot abide in borrowed certainty.

Once you truly experience with your mind and heart, your inclination to invest in theories and concepts diminishes. “He who tastes, knows” is a popular saying.

A theoretician was passing by a river and spotted a dervish sitting by a riverbank, the curve of his neck bared to the sun. Eager to test a theory, the scholar slapped loudly the exposed neck with his palm. The dervish, screaming with pain, turned around to hit him, but the scholar said, “Wait! Before you hit me, please tell me, “The sound we heard, was it from the neck hitting the palm or the palm hitting the neck?” “O, misguided scholar,” replied the dervish, “the pain I feel does not leave me room to theorize and speculate. You would not understand because you feel no pain!”

Through heart felt experiences one matures; through the richness of experiences faith blossoms and one’s being transform into what sages describe as “rosy red with illumination.” What is fascinating is that at this stage one begins to radiate beauty and authenticity in everything one says or does.

Students of grandfather often remarked that they learned not only by listening to his words but also by watching the glow in his face as he talked of Allah; the beautiful movement of his hands as he stressed a point; the glistening in his eyes as he touched on his favorite themes: compassion for self, awareness and gratitude to God.

All Masters lovingly push us to dance through life experience after life experience. They preach through example. Rumi, in his deepest moments of anguish, danced and whirled; in times of ecstatic joy, he danced and whirled.

*Dance if you’ve torn the bandage off*  
*Dance in the middle of the fighting*  
*Dance in your blood*  
*Dance when you’re completely free.*

## Reflections

- Ibrahim Ben Adham, the eighth century king who gave up his kingdom to become a seeker of truth, came upon a large stone with the inscription: “Turn me over and read”. On the back of the stone, he discovered another inscription: “You do not practice what you know. Why do you seek what you do not know.”
- A disciple thanked his Sheikh for teaching him caution. “These days,” said the student, “I think not once or twice but three times before recklessly jumping in.” “Once is enough,” replied the Master.

## 23

### Inner Teacher

#### *Every Muslim is his own priest*

The Mulla was deathly ill, lying on his bed, his life ebbing away, surrounded by family, friends and his wailing wife. The doctor examined the Mulla at length, turned to the Mulla's wife and spoke with eloquence, "The Quran says, 'Only Allah, the Light of the Heavens and Earth, is immortal.' (24:35) O honorable wife of the Mulla, the Mulla is no more. He is dead." As the doctor continued, the Mulla was feebly heard to say, "No, wait! I am alive! I am alive!" "Quiet, quiet!" retorted his wife, "The doctor is speaking. Don't argue with the doctor!"

At every opportunity grandfather pointed to our slavish dependence on pundits and authorities. A popular village idiom says: "When you are moved by bird in song, do you feel the need to ask it for credentials?" Degrees and titles blind us. Sadly, we fail to cultivate and bring out the teacher within us, our inner guide.

*The Jesus of your spirit lies within you  
Ask for his help, for he is a great helper.*

#### Outer Teachers

Do we need outer teachers? Of course we do. To connect with our inner teacher it is wise to consult a guide who knows the inner landscape.

Spiritual teachers say that we are like water that needs to cook and boil. The teachers is an intermediary, a kettle, between the fire and us. In another metaphor, we need the radiance of the

sun to grow and evolve. It is difficult to stare into the naked sun, but the moon is easy and delightful to gaze upon. The moon is none other than the Sun's overwhelming radiance taking beautiful form. We need moon-like teachers to guide us.

Students living in far flung villages in northern Bengal sought advice from grandfather about studying with teachers in their local area. Islam has no organized priesthood. Prophet Mohammad said, "Every Muslim is his own priest." The Quran says that between man and God there are no intermediaries.

However, one needs teachers who help the inner teacher in us to emerge. Choosing a teacher wisely is important. Grandfather advised discernment.

Be wary of fire breathing preachers and teachers who are noisy, aggressive and competitive, those who raise a lot of dust and din.

*All fireworks and no light*

*All husk and no kernel.*

The Mulla started preaching in the Town Square. At first, a large crowd gathered. The Mulla was loud, emphatic and dramatic. Slowly, as the days rolled by, the crowd thinned out until not one person showed up. But daily the Mulla continued to preach in his aggressive fashion. Asked why he continued in the empty town square, the Mulla explained, "In the beginning, I had hoped to change these people. If I still shout, it is only to prevent them from changing me!"

Sheer numbers of listeners or followers does not authenticate a teacher. To prove his point, the Mulla one day went to the speaker's dais in the town square and bellowed out, "O people! O people! Listen to me. Do you want riches without work, knowledge without difficulties, truth without falsehood, attainment without effort, progress without sacrifice. . .?" The

Mulla repeated his message several times, and each time the crowd multiplied, swelling in numbers. They began to clamor, “Yes! Yes!” Finally his point proven, Mulla said, “Excellent. . . thank you! I only wanted to know. You may rely on me to tell you about it in good time!”

Authentic wisdom does not clamor for attention. There is no need to aggressively advertise one’s existence. Maulana Rumi asks, “Does a magnet cry out to the iron filings, ‘O please,’ come to me!”

The true teacher is deeply compassionate. He or she sees all beings coming from the same sacred Source, healing, integrating and transforming their personalities usually with some exertion and suffering, and returning to the Source. He helps us to become not like the teacher, but more our real selves. This, grandfather emphasized, is a key insight.

### Hidden Teachers

Grandfather marveled at the phenomena that once the inner teacher awakens in us, we become aware of hidden teachers everywhere and in everything.

The renowned master, Hasan of Basra, teased a child who was lighting a candle. “Little one, tell me where did this magical flame come from?” The child instantly blew out the candle and asked, “You tell me, where did the flame go?” This awakened something deep in him. The little child, he said, was a big teacher.

One teacher mastered the art of concentration by watching a cat absorbed in its prey before pouncing. Another learned fearlessness by observing a thirsty dog at the edge of a pond. Eager to drink, but frozen and scared by its reflection, eventually the dog plunged in. The fearful image disappeared and he was able to quench his thirst.

A verse from the Quran says, “And in the earth are signs for those whose faith is certain.” (51:20) All around us are signs and messages pointing the way. The mystics with their heightened consciousness are eloquent in their expressions: the song of birds and the voice of insects are all means of conveying truth to the mind. In flowers and grasses are woven messages; in the clapping of leaves there are specific instructions; at dawn the breeze has secrets to tell. The Universe, aware of our minutest needs, is eager to serve us at every step.

We are asked to honor our teachers, but especially the wise teacher in each of us. Adore outer teachers, but know that this comes from adoration of one’s inner teacher.

## **Reflections**

*The teacher kindles the light  
The oil is already in the lamp.  
(Traditional)*

## **Practices**

- Listen to authorities and experts but intuit whether this is in harmony with your inner teacher. Does it correspond with what your heart tells you? Can you distinguish your inner teacher from the demands of your ego? Become silent, go within and listen. By reflecting in this way again and again, the wise teacher within begins to emerge. Initially, you might hear several voices in you. If you listen to the voice of the ego and make a mistake, be compassionate with yourself and persist.

*The Fragrance of Faith*

With practice you learn discernment and eventually connect with the voice of your real guide.

## Introduction to The Profession of Faith

*There is no God but God  
and Mohammad is the messenger of God*

The first pillar of Islam is the creed of faith called the Shahadah. The exact words of the Shahadah are in two parts: “*La illaha il Allah; Mohammadan Rasul Allah*”. Literally the words mean “There is no God but God and Mohammad is the messenger of God.” The creed professes unity of God and the prophethood of Mohammad.

The two part Shahadah is filled with insights. It is useful to deal with each part separately.

## 24

### The Shahadah – Part 1

#### *There Is No God But God*

This verse affirming the unity of God is among the most repeated verses in the world, because it is recited by Muslims continuously. Upon the birth of a child the words of the Shahadah are tenderly spoken in the child's ears; on the person's death bed, again, those words are said to him or her. Between birth and death that person's being becomes imprinted with the Shahadah in prayers, meditations, and in all occasions, joyous, tragic, unexpected, mundane and special.

The understanding of this verse is encompassed by the heart, not the mind. One way to “perfume” our being with this insight is to meditate on sacred verses from the Holy Book. The Quran, in a sense, is the best commentary upon itself: a part of the Quran explains another. My parents chose the following verses for me to ponder on to come closer to understanding the meaning of “There is no God but God”:

- Of knowledge we have given you but a little. (17:84-85)
- Everywhere you turn is the face of Allah. (2:115)
- We have shown you the dust but concealed the wind. (Rumi)
- We are closer to you than your jugular vein. (50:16)
- Everything that dwells upon the earth is perishing yet still abides the face of thy Lord, Majestic, Splendid. (55:26-27)

## 25

### Mystery

*Of knowledge we have given you but a little  
(17:84-85)*

In chapter 31, the Quran says that if all trees on earth were to become pens and oceans ink and after depletion, replenished by seven more oceans of ink, still this would not come close to fathoming God's mysteries. We are awash in mysteries within and without.

Indeed, of knowledge we have been given but a little. Here is Rumi's advice: Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment! Your cleverness may be opinion, while your bewilderment may be naked vision.

#### Mystery of existence

In the wee hours of the morning, the Mulla stumbled out of a tavern and began wandering the street aimlessly. A policeman accosted him: "Who are you? Why are you out at this unusual hour? Where are you going?" "Sir," replied the Mulla. "If I knew the answer to all those questions, I would have been home a long time ago!"

Our deepest questions in life find resonance in sweet bewilderment. Rumi muses: "Do you think that I know what I am doing; that for one breath or half-breath I belong to myself, as much as a pen knows what it's writing or a ball can guess where it's going next?"

If we do not feel the sense of awe in us, it's because we are cooped up in the dark. Imagine, Rumi asks, how it is to converse with an embryo cooped up in the dark. You might say, "The world outside is vast and intricate. There are wheat fields and mountain passes, and orchards in bloom. At night there are millions of galaxies, and in sunlight, the beauty of friends dancing at a wedding." Listen to the answer of the embryo: "There is no other world – you must be hallucinating."

Mystery of journey

*Not only the thirsty seek water  
But the water seeks the thirsty as well.*

In a Maulana Rumi story, some sweet school children urge their impoverished teacher to jump in the swollen flood waters and grab the bear skin coat floating by. The fur can keep the teacher warm in winter. He jumps in, grabs the coat, then seems to have trouble bringing it out of the water. "Sir, dear teacher," plead the alarmed children, "Let go of the coat. Forget it. Please swim to shore quickly." "I've let go of the it," shouts the teacher; "but the it won't let go of me!" It was a live bear. One of the more amazing things on our journey is that once you step on the path an invisible force like a magnet pulls and guides you.

This is how it is on the path. Something invisible get hold of you and won't let go. Sooner or later, the Light hunts you down and dissolves the shadows in you as part of its own mysterious divine plan.

Grandfather cherished the insight of Bayezid Bistami that for thirty years he searched for God and came to the astonishing realization that God is the seeker and he, Bayezid, the one being sought! In fulfilling our life purpose, God's purpose is fulfilled.

And what is it like to experience that ultimate union with God that Islamic saints call “fana” (union with God) and “baqa” (what subsists after union)? Grandfather invoked the ecstatic utterance of Kabir: “The drop does not go into the Ocean; the Ocean goes into the drop!”

#### Mystery of hereafter

Our knowledge of the hereafter is limited by the human mind: what happens after death in those realms is a mystery. Vivid images describing heaven and hell in the Quran are metaphorical meant to incline the heart of the believer to engage in “abiding good deeds” (19:76) and lessen our attachment to the “glittering show on earth”. (18:7) Certainly we are accountable for our actions on earth, but human understanding of rewards and punishment does not apply in those domains.

The Quran says, “To God belongs the secrets of the heavens and the earth”. (18:26) Attempting to understand the invisible world with our sense facilities is as the village saying goes: “measuring the depth of the ocean with a bamboo stick”.

Grandfather humbly offered his own understanding: on earth we are like school children learning and occasionally sitting for tests. In the hereafter we are given corrected answers and more learning. According to our level, our journey of evolving into perfection continues in heavenly spheres.

To convey the futility of trying to define the invisible worlds, grandfather enjoyed relating the following Rumi story:

A just king said to a dervish: “When total revelation has graced you, and you come into the nearness of God, please remember me to God.” The dervish answered, “When I step into that Presence and the Light of the Sun of Splendor shines over me,

I will no more even remember myself. How do you expect me to remember you?”

### **Amal**

Grandfather was some days of the month in a state of delicious daze. Some evenings he stayed up all night doing “amal” – a mystical practice where in a meditative state one continuously recites parts of the Quran. Late into the night or early morning he felt palpably the presence of amazing energies. At times he saw incredible things. Sometimes he heard celestial music. Some specific invisible energies, grandfather said, became his allies in his work of healing. Joyously he proclaimed that he was a witness to a fraction of a fraction of the mysteries of the Universe. Grandfather was in total astonishment and felt unbounded gratitude!

*If one drop of the wine of vision  
Could rinse your eyes  
Wherever you look,  
You would weep with wonder.*

## **Reflections**

*I've lived on the lips of insanity  
Wanting to know reasons. Knocking on a door,  
It opens. . .  
I've been knocking from the inside  
(Rumi)*

*Observe the wonders as they occur around you  
Don't claim them  
Feel the artistry moving through and be silent*

*The Fragrance of Faith*

*(Rumi)*

## **Practice**

- Practice sending light from your heart to the heart of every human soul you meet and, also, to the spirit of whatever you come in contact with: animals, trees, plants, flowers, water, stone, etc. This awakens and expands the Light in you.

## 26

### Face of Allah

#### *Everywhere you turn is the face of Allah (2:115)*

The Mulla traveled to the sacred Kaaba in the grand mosque of Mecca. After hours of prayer and meditation in the great mosque, the Mulla fell asleep. His feet pointed toward the Kaaba. This enraged some Meccans who woke him up and told him how disrespectful and sacrilegious it was to place his feet toward the House of Allah. "Very well," said the Mulla, "please take my feet and put them in the direction of where Allah is not." The Meccans left the Mulla alone.

Everywhere you turn is the Face of Allah, says the Quran.

#### Mud of daily existence

It follows, then, that this material world and activities we consider mundane are also the face of God. Prophet Mohammad said, "Do not despise this world for this world, too, is God."

In the East, the lotus flower is a symbol of beauty and spirituality. Notice, teachers tell us, that the flower has a stem that roots it in the mud. The spiritual flower owes its existence to the mud; it is the mud of daily existence that feeds the root of the spiritual flower. If we cannot find God in the mud of daily existence, how can we find God in some distant sacred place. Always, the face of Allah is everywhere!

#### The devil and face of Allah

The Quran says that the devil is a “slinking whisperer who whispers in the heart of human beings” (114:1-6) Is the devil also the face of Allah? Indeed, the devil is from God but God does not approve of the devil. What is the meaning of this? This mystifying paradox is resolved only by higher consciousness. Maulana Rumi offers some examples for us to ponder on:

A doctor for his or her livelihood needs people to become ill. Does a doctor approve of people suffering?

A baker needs people to become hungry. Does a baker approve of them starving?

Through the mysterious presence of this “slinking whisperer”, we build in us qualities of restraint, discernment, right action, patience, inner strength, etc. Eventually, the energy of the devil is always dissolved in the light.

#### **Closest to the Light**

Regarding daily activities, a question commonly asked is this: How does one sacralize the vast range of daily activities without getting overwhelmed? One faces responsibilities with self, family, work, community, religion, etc. If the face that God is everywhere, how does one prioritize one activity over another.

Maulana Rumi offers advice inspired by the Quran: “Of all your activities, direct your efforts on those ‘closest to the Light’. Make all your efforts one single concern and God will look after all your other concerns.”

Let’s say for example that among some of your needs is raising money for your business, preparing for a law suit, attending a religious ceremony and caring for your ailing mother. Ask yourself which of these is closest to the Light. Which activity holds the greatest sacredness and meaning for you? You decide on this by consulting with your inner teacher. Maybe you decide that taking

care of your mother is closest to the Light. Willingly and lovingly, focus your activities on tending to her and as for the others, the fundraising, the lawsuit and the religious ceremony, give to them whatever is left of your energy and time without avoidance or aversion.

Again, you are asked not to use this formula as an excuse to avoid or delay working on that which is unpleasant or inconvenient to you. As you attend to that closest to the Light, the others work themselves out wonderfully well. The Light, it is said, takes care of them. Maulana Rumi says there is a great secret in this for anyone who can grasp it.

## Reflections

*Do for this world as if thou were to live a thousand years  
And for the next world as if thou were to die tomorrow.  
(Hadith)*

*Any work that veils me from Your Face  
Is the essence of unemployment  
Even though business is its name.  
(Maulana Rumi)*