

Sun at Midnight. Despair and Trust in the Islamic Mystical Tradition.

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In the Name of the One who has no Name,
He who appears before you, how ever you call Him!

How does Islamic theology and Koran exegesis, some of whose representatives set out to find the most modern developments, such as the atomic bomb, in the Koran, deal with the latest interpretations of quantum physics, of Heisenberg's uncertainty relation, and with the question of whether the sub-atomic world is made up of waves or particles? How does a theologian react to the notion that parts of the atom influence each other and that the observer himself plays a role in the shaping of future events? Are these discoveries compatible with the traditional idea of a God who knows all; are they compatible with the various terms for fate: *qadar*, *qada*, or *qismat*?

At least one Islamic thinker would probably gladly accept these new ideas, just as he allocated a place to Einstein in his philosophical-poetic cosmos. He is Muhammad Iqbāl, the indo-Islamic poet-philosopher (1877-1938). Like many earlier mystically inclined thinkers, he did not believe in the immutable nature of Fate. Time and again he urged his listeners and readers in daring verse to ask God for a new fate, since the fates he held in his hand were, like Himself, infinite.

Islamic thinkers also have little difficulty in accepting the idea that the tiniest causes can have the biggest consequences and that systems depend on their incipient conditions and may react quite differently to the slightest changes of circumstance. If the modern chaos theorist asserts that the flutter of a butterfly in the Philippines might be the cause of a gale in Europe, Muslims will quickly be reminded that Nimrod, the great tyrant, was killed by a tiny mosquito in his brain; and as far as the origins are concerned – well,

the smallest deviation in laying the first brick of a minaret is liable to change its statics and shape, even if it may not be immediately visible.

Iqbāl, who has just been mentioned, has taken up Einstein's notion that time and space are elastic, that the concepts of past and present do not have universal validity. Here we approach the views of the Islamic mystic whose great representatives have, since the late Middle Ages, applied a passage in the Koran to a dual notion of time. The Koran (Sura 41/53) contains a passage to the effect that God gives his signs to men "in the horizons and within themselves" or "within their souls". From this they develop the concepts of *zaman afaqi*, signifying the time related to the horizons and to the visible cosmos, on the one hand, and of *zaman anfusi*, the time of the souls, on the other.

The only constant on which one can count – as modern physicists would say – is the absolute speed of light. And since the Koran (Sura 24/35) speaks of God as "the light of the heavens and of earth", these words seemed to offer from early on an apt symbol of God's existence. Iqbāl interprets them as referring not to the omnipresence, but to the absoluteness of God. In this he follows Suhrawardi, the master of enlightenment philosophy who was killed in 1191. The latter's work, that identified – as Toshihiko Isuzu puts it – existence with light, has been decoded by Henry Corbin: "What is understood metaphysically as *wudshud* (existence), coincided with what we experience empirically as light."

Most Islamic mystics have written on this, with 'Attar (d. 1220) perhaps finding the most beautiful words in the prooemium of his *Ilāhīnāma*. However, they all knew that this light was too powerful to be watched without a screen. Shabistari, the author of the widely read Persian philosophical poem *Gulshān-it rāz*, composed the following words: "The absolute appears before the human eye so absolutely naked so it is hence not visible." And the Egyptian Ibn 'Ata Allah (died 1309) says in his Arabic *hikām*: "What God veils from you is His oversized closeness to you; for He hides behind His all too overwhelming clarity, and is invisible to the eye because his light is too strong."

However, what happens if one tries to comprehend and to describe this super-light, whose power makes it invisible? Is this

the “black light”? Is it the reality behind the trance as which this life has often been viewed? The word of the prophet that “men sleep, and they wake up when they die” has inspired innumerable thinkers and poets. Life – is it not *khwāb andar khwāb* (“sleep in sleep, dream in dream”), from which one wakes up in the morning glow of eternity into order the learn the meaning of the dream?

The notion that Absolute God is something that blinds the eye and causes one to lapse into silence, is common to most religions. It is the *deus absconditus* from which rises the *deus revelatus*, the God whom one can recognize or at least dimly see through his works. Basically the mystic can only speak of the *deus revelatus* who, in whatever ways, reveals Himself, who becomes man’s intimate friend with whom he can enter into a dialogue; He is the God who has created the world and who, at the end of time, will judge its inhabitants and call them to His side. It is the God whom the prophets have experienced as they heard His voice in the thunderstorm or in a tender whisper and who preached and called in His name.

But most of them knew or sensed that behind this God who presented Himself in the attire of majesty and mercy was the unknowable primordial being, who could not be reached by any thought that had been thought – the *neti neti* of the Upanishades; He of whom, according to Dionysius Areopaghita, we merely know “that He is in how we say what He is not.”

It is this unspeakable Being that Isutzu has called chaos when he formulated his important comparison between key notions in Ibn ‘Arabi and those of the Daoist thinkers: Chuang tzu and Lao tzu know of the primordial chaos, the undifferentiated, the shapeless in which everything can also be everything else; it is the chaos from which the ordered cosmos may emerge. A Persian miniature from the 17th century, entitled mystical journey, depicts this amorphous and wonderful primordial chaos in unsurpassed beauty.

The Sufis knew of this primordial source from which everything emanates. They knew that the divine Being is the opposite of everything we can imagine. It can not just be described, as through the *via causalitatis*, as the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge; nor through the *via eminentiae* as *Allahu akbar*, the God who is greater than all things. He is *bi chun* (“without How”); He is

equally distant from *tashbi* (anthropomorphism) as He is from *tanzih*, the depletion, the total abstraction. As the Koran puts it in Sura 57/3: He is the First; He is the Last; He is the One Outside and the One Within – this is the common definition of God.

And yet time and again the attempt is made to move beyond an experience of God that is delimited by revelation and intellectual definitions. It seems to me that Iqbar has made a particularly interesting contribution when he depicts, in his *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* the divine Ego and combines the statement in the Koran with one of Goethe's thoughts. As he put it:

The ultimate Ego exists in pure perpetuity,
In which change ceased to be a sequence of changeable
Attitudes,

And reveals its true character as a continuous creation
"Unmoved by fatigue" and "not to be overcome by slumber and
Sleep."¹

This reference to Sura 2/256 which describes God's all-encompassing greatness is followed by one of Goethe's verses:

If the same thing flows in infinity,
Repeating itself till eternity,
The thousand-fold vault
Becomes firmly interlocked,
The *joie de vivre* pours forth from all things,
From the smallest and the biggest star,
And all pushing, all wrestling
Is eternal peace in the Lord.²

The Indo-Islamic poet-philosopher continues:

The not-yet of man means striving and can mean failure.
The not-yet of God means the infallible realization
Of the infinite creative possibility of His existence,
Which retains its wholeness throughout the entire process.

God, as Saint Augustin put it, is *semper agens semper quietus*, and Iqbar, like many Islamic thinkers, would have fully agreed with him in this respect.

If God's life is to be described as self-revelation, as persistent action, Sufism probably offers the most beautiful key for under-

standing it in this way. According to *hadith qudsi*, a divine word not to be found in the Koran, He "was a hidden treasure and wanted to be recognized; that is why I created the world (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan*).” Perhaps the only thing we can say about God is that He is a "hidden treasure"; for he is the *ghaniy*, the eternally Rich One who rests in Himself (*istighna*).

The hidden treasure cannot be described, even if some poets saw in it the treasure of absolute beauty. This is Jami's theme in his introductory lines to *Yusuf and Zulaikha*: Beauty always wants to present itself. However, this appears already to be too humanized. The great theme of the mystics is the question of how did the cosmos emerge from the primordial treasure that cannot ever be reached nor described? A myth, that Henry Corbin has once again studied most closely, knows that the 99 names (i.e., the most beautiful 99 names for God) were longing to manifest themselves. As Thomas Aquinas once remarked, it is the Creator's wish, to reveal His grandeur. So strong was the longing of the names that were contained in the "Treasure" that they suddenly burst forth, like breath that had been held back for too long. Again we must think of Goethe:

And He spoke the word "Let it be!"
When a painful ouch was to be heard,
As the universe crashed with a powerful gesture
Into the realities.³

The act of creation is thus to be compared to a burst of divine breath; it is God's breath (*nafas ar-rahman*) that Muhammad once felt coming from the Yemen. And just like the breath, the worlds are at any moment reabsorbed into the Treasure. The world exists in perpetuity; the creation continues without interruption. The Sufi sees God's breathing in and out also in the movement of a confession of faith: "There is no deity" (*la ilah*) "except for God" (*illa Allāh*); the names that have been breathed out do not represent God; but when breath is taken in again, God is all that still exists.

With Creation there emerges a dualism. The Arabic word for Creation is *kun* (spelled k-n), a two-letter word that resembles, as Dshalaluddin Rumi put it, a piece of rope twisted of two threads that hides from the untrained eye its underlying unity. All creation is duality, a division of the absolute subject into subject and object. The Kabbalists as well as the Sufis have pointed to the fact

that both the Torah and the Koran start with the letter *b*, whose numerical value in the semitic alphabet is 2. God's absolute unity, the unity of the Treasure, manifests itself in *dshalal* (majesty) and *Jamāl* (beauty), just as in the 20th century Rudolph Otto has rightly referred to the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* as aspects of a terrifying God. With Creation there arise conceptual pairs, whether it is the *yan* and *yin* of East Asian cultures or the more familiar juxtapositions without which we do not seem to be able to live: negative and positive, systole and diastole of heart-beat, breathing in and breathing out, day and night, man and woman, black and white etc.

These juxtapositions veil original unity and thus make it indirectly visible. *Latafa* (refinement, intellectual subtlety) becomes recognizable only through *kathafa* (coarseness). Could we see the breeze unless we noticed the swaying of twigs and grass? Could we, asks Rumi, see the sun and appreciate its utility if it were without cover? Creation also means the emergence of the discursive intellect which is juxtaposed to the experience of ecstatic love. And while this intellect tries to pry loose one piece after the other from the dark or overly bright primordial chaos and to push it into the light of logic, love plunges into the flames in order to restore unity.

The imagery that pervades the mystical poetry of Islam – and in particular the variant that developed in Persia or countries under the influence of Persian culture – is based on the tension between the poet and the jurist, between the Ka 'ba of orthodox religion and the "heathen temple" of the lovers who strive for unification, between the rosary of pious Muslims and the heretic's belt of those who adhere to a religion of love. Frequently ritualized, these images and metaphors nevertheless contain a permanent tension between chaos and order. If the Turkish folk poet Yunus Emre (d. 1321) writes: "I drank a patron's wine whose wine-house was higher than the throne", he means to indicate by this that he has moved beyond the *deus revelatus* into the eternal, undifferentiated wine-house.

However, as one of the prophets put it, man is tied to this dualism; he is held "between God's two fingers", who turns him in whatever way He pleases. And when God is described by a faithful, He, the Creator, appears as the great calligrapher, who holds

His pen, i.e., the human heart, between His fingers in order to write with it whatever He pleases. He is also the great weaver who weaves a robe for Himself so that one may admire His beauty. His robe might be described as a double-sided brocade, as Rumi has done for the Koran. And both sides manifest themselves in his relationship with man; 'abd, the slave, stands before his master, *rabb*; *faqir*, the abjectly poor person, turns to the *ghaniy*, the person of tremendous wealth; the sinner hopes to face a benevolent master and fears His justice. Thus Yahya ibn Mu'adh (d. 874) offers the following prayer: "Oh, God, how can I call You when I am a rebellious slave; and how could I not call You since You are a merciful master?"

Because, according to Sura 55, God is busy with something every day, i.e. all the time (*kullu Yaumin huwa fi sha'n*) no end is in sight for these two-fold epiphanies. The person who views them with the eye of a logician will only see the contrasts. The eye of love, on the other hand, will see or at least surmise the underlying unity. Is it not true, asks Rumi, that God has created the whole world as a tent in which everyone has a different job, tasks that, though they often have opposite effects, ultimately nevertheless serve a single goal? How could it be logically explained why snake poison can both kill and heal and why the winds destroyed the disobedient people of 'Ad, while it also become the carrier of Salomon's throne? In his prose work *Fihi ma fihi* Rumi tries to explain this contradiction:

A king has in his realm prisons and gallows
Honorific robes and wealth, landed estates and retinues,
Festivities and celebrations, drums and banners.
All this is well in respect of the king.
Just as the robes are part of the perfection of his kingdom,
The gallows and the killing and the prisons likewise belong
To it.
All these things are part of the perfection that relates to
Him; but as far as the people are concerned – could the
robes and the gallows be the same?

The contrasts that pervade the cosmos generally and that, in mystical perspective, correspond to the intra-divine dualism that was revealed by Creation, are reflected in the sequence of mystical stations. Fear and hope, patience and gratitude, presence and absence – we could go on for a long time with enumerating the

various stages that appear in the works of the classical writers of Sufism such as Sarradsh or Hudshwiri. Since God is the one who gives life and administers death (*almuhyi al mumit*), the wanderer constantly finds himself between these two states, between *fanā* and *bagā*. Dhu'n-Nun, the Egyptian (d. 859) neatly encapsulated this when he dealt with the above two names of God: "No-one sees God and dies, just as no-one sees God and lives; for His life is eternal, and whoever sees Him, will remain within Him and will be eternalized."

Among the states that are particularly important for Sufis and that are frequently dealt with, *qabd* and *bast* are particularly instructive. In his *Sharh-i shathiyat* (para. 371) Ruzbihan Baqli had this to say:

Qabd (compression) and *bast* (expansion) represent two noble states. Those who recognize are being forced to make a standard confession (*tauhid*) and, with the veils of domination, the destruction of the lights of victory and the power of humiliation in their hearts, takes away from them the characteristics of humanity. When He gives them *bast* through the unveiling of beauty, of good qualities, and in charming addresses, He provides them with ecstasy, intoxication and happiness so that they enjoy the music and dance.

The root of *qabd* is the dissolution of the innermost kernel back in primordial eternity, and the root of *bast* is the existence of such a kernel in infinite eternity.

The two states were treated somewhat more simply than by Ruzbihan by 'Attar in Iran. According to him *qabd* means to pitch one's tent in the eye of a needle. *Bast*, on the other hand, implies that one leaves both worlds behind and in a single ecstasy ascends to a hundred new worlds (*Musibatnama* 42). He also views the day as glowing white due to *bast*, while the night is black and burned by *qabd*. Thus *qabd* is the dark night of the soul.

The shift from one of the two states into the other that is constantly possible is perhaps most beautifully captured in a poem by Goethe in his *West-Östlicher Divan*, whose theme the famous German author took from Persian poetry:

There are two graces in catching breath:
To take in air and to exhale it again.

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The one distresses, the other refreshes you.
Life is so beautifully mixed.
Thank God when He distresses you
And thank him when He releases you again. ⁴

The Western reader might gain the impression from the jubilant poetry of Persian, Turkish or even Indo-Islamic writers that the Sufis lived almost permanently in a state of *bast* and that they experienced permanent paradisaical beauty here and now. However, it must be emphasized that the state of *qabd* was more important for the 'sober' religious orders. Here the searching faithful felt he was completely dependent on God and without the power to wish for anything. He merely experienced the presence of an overwhelming unity that did not provide access to help from beings that had been created.

Ibn 'Ata Allah is the great preacher of this position. His *Hikām* is a book of consolation for all those who go through the dark night of the soul. He writes:

It can be that darkness overcomes you,
So that He lets you recognize the value of what He gives
You.
Who does not see the value of His graces,
When they are visible,
Will recognize this value when He misses them. (185)

...

Sometimes you find greater gain in distress than in fasting
And praying.
Situations of distress are carpets full of gifts. (163)

These lines show how sudden fulfillment can arise from distress, from being distant from God. In the dark night of the soul there suddenly appears the sun at midnight. This is a sun that is not the sun from "either East or West", as alluded to in the Koran's verse of light (Sura 24/35). It is a sun that, in Halladsh's words, surpasses all comprehension: "Sometimes, however, you rise for the hearts in the Occident, and sometimes you go down for the hearts in the Orient."

There is also the possibility that the midnight sun is seen as "*le plain jour de l'imagination dans la nuit des sens*", as Henry Corbin has put it in his *L'Homme et son age*. Indeed, his entire study of

L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien is devoted to the theme of the growing presence of the spiritual sun, whose successive appearances he traces in the works of the great mystics of Kubrawi.

But let us return to the notion that the hope for the midnight sun lights up in the hour of greatest despair. One of the most beautiful Persian verses on this subject was written by Khaqani, the unsurpassed master of the word (d. 1199): "All nights of sorrow go pregnant with the day of joy: *shab-i-yaldā*, the Joseph "day" is in the well of the longest night."

"The nights are pregnant" is also a well-known Persian proverb. The contrast with *shab-i-yaldā* is particularly elegant, because this is the "night of birth", i.e., of Christmas which roughly coincides with winter solstice. Apart from this brilliant play with words, Khaqani introduces yet another theme, i.e., that of Yousouf, the Joseph of the Bible and of the Koran. Yousouf's story is recounted in Sura 12 as the "most beautiful story". Accordingly poets have time and again seen in Yousouf the manifestation of absolute beauty that fills the hearts with love. However, Yousouf had to undergo many difficult tests, and writers like to regard his time in the deep well (*chāh*) into which his jealous brothers had thrown him as a precondition of his later high rank (*jāh*). This experience can become the psychic motif -of the soul that is separated from the homeland (Kanaan) and reaches its actual destination only after long journeys. It is no coincidence that *Sura Yousouf* (12/58) speaks of "great patience"; for, as we shall see, patience is an important ingredient of travelling so that the torments and deprivations along the path will be transformed into pleasures. Yousouf's journey through darkness is decisive for our purposes, not the fact that the scent of his shirt healed his blind father or that Zulaikha loved him passionately.

The theme of the path and of wandering is common to all religious traditions, whether it is the search for the Heavenly Jerusalem in *Pilgrim's Progress* or for the Ka'ba of the lovers or even for the city that has no name. The searching persons always knew that here they lived in exile. Even for a modernist like Iqbal the *hijrah*, Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina and back, becomes a symbol: it is the necessity to leave traditional forms behind. For the mystics, on the other hand, Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina and back is a symbol for the wan-

dering of the soul that wanders to the focal point of all its longing, to the house of the beloved one. Not by accident did Iqbal see himself as a caravan bell that would show the erring Muslims the way to the center of their religion, and to him this implied its essence. However, for the majority of the mystics the Prophet's heavenly journey was the model for the soul's return to divine unity, where even Gabriel is the pure spirit who fails to find a space between man and God, between worshipper and the subject of his worship. Iqbal has dealt with this theme in his *Dshavidnama*.

Even if not all mystics employ these images, they all know that they live in exile. They are – as Suhrawardi, the master of revelation, puts – in the Western exile (*ghurbat al-gharbiyya*) here, and this statement becomes all the more intriguing since *ghurba* (strange land) and *gharb* (West) have the same Arabic root.

Did Islam not also come into their world as a “stranger”, as the Iman Dsha'far as-sadiq is said to have remarked? Here on this earth the souls of humans are as if they are exiled; they are held together through matter, and that is why, as Rumi writes repeatedly, they are as unhappy as the gazelle in the ass's stable, as the nightingale among the ravens; why they dream of a homeland where they in fact belong, of the deity's desert, of the rose garden of eternal beauty.

Suhrawardi's prisoners live, like the heroes of the gnostic myths, in a dark room, in a well, and it is possible that they might suddenly be blessed with a view of the light – of the light that comes from the direction of the Yemen and that appears where the celestial axis, the axis of the universe lights up; this is the sun at midnight. Does the radiant emerald mountain not lie beyond the deepest and confusing darkness, as Simnani asserts? It is a sudden revelation, a sudden sound or scent that reminds the soul of the homeland, as a Persian verse phrases it in dramatic imagery: “The elephant who saw India in his dreams yesterday, broke his chains. Who has the power to hold him?”

The man who lives in exile here undertakes his spiritual journey of the Orient guided by a spark of light that one day will shine in its full brightness, when he has found the origin of the universe before the word “Let be” split the One into two and into a multitude.

To be sure, frequently this search is seemingly without hope, as an Indo-Islamic poet of the 18th century, Mir Dard (d. 1785) puts it in his complicated ways, bemoaning that he will never succeed in penetrating the heart of the deity's desert, of the absolute:

Oh, you holy valley and Absolute Being – however much the pure foundations of the level of Your Absoluteness may have brushed aside the undergrowth of additional attributes and in Your own eye may be free of all limiting relationships, the entire land of shifting sand dunes nevertheless forms waves in these wide open spaces and ties the foot of every being with the chain of individualization.

And even if each quick-footed wanderer has despite himself broken the chain of these imaginary individualizations and hurries toward the Pure and Absolute Being, the desert of absoluteness will nevertheless at any moment be caught by the snare of a new individualization, though it does not leave the wide spaces of absoluteness; in effect it turns out to be a prisoner of any individualization and does not become the free Absolute.

The wave of the dunes threw the desert's chains around my Foot.

With every step I touch, without wanting it, the seams of The Desert.

Mir Dard is merely one among thousands and thousands of searching souls who suffered under their inability to find anything. He as well as all others knew that to reach the destination required endless patience. It is no accident that the poets of Islam have time and again pointed to the Arab proverb that "patience is the key to pleasure." It is worth remembering in this context how long the time-spans are that are required to reach maturity. Sana'i has indicated this in a poem that has been imitated many times:

It takes years in Badakhshan or Kameol in the Yemen before a stone, transformed by sunlight, becomes a ruby.

It takes months before, through water and soil, a cotton seed becomes a festive dress for a beautiful person or becomes a martyr's shroud.

It takes days before a hand-full of wool from a sheep's back has been turned into an ascetic's robe or into an ass's rein.

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It takes a whole life for a child to become, thanks to his ability, a scholar or a sensitive poet.

However, the transformation does not merely taken a long, almost unduly long time, but, like all metamorphoses, is also painful. Hafiz has expressed this in a wonderful image: "It is said that the stone that rests in the soil can change into a ruby. Well, it can do it – but only with the blood of its heart."

Suffering – the suffering of melting metal in alchemy is necessary for the maturing process. It is, as Meister Eckhart put it, the fastest horse that leads to perfection. The Islamic mystics have always given special emphasis to the suffering of the prophet who has been sent by God. There is a much cited word according to which prophets are the ones who experience the worst visitations; they are followed by the holy men and only then by others. It is typical that Ruzbihan Baqli put a section at the beginning of his *Sharh-i shathiyāt*, entitled *Fi imtihān alqaum* ("On the Visitation of People", i.e. the men of God), which starts with the following questions:

Did you not see what Iblis did with Adam?
Did you not see how Iblis fled before Ahriman?
Did you not see what lamenting Noah suffered from his son?

And thus we can go through the long rhymes of the entire list of prophets who are known from the Koran. 'Attar, for example, enumerates at about the same time in his *Mantiq ut-tair* the suffering of the prophets. In his *Ushturnama* he reports on the tyranny and the visitations that they experienced. As Emile Dermenghem has shown, the trend to establish litanies with the names of suffering lovers and holy men. The writers who resort to such forms integrate themselves into these models. Suffering is thought to be crucially important for a man's development: "Someone who does not experience this pain, is no man; there is no cure where there is no pain."

It should not be overlooked that the Persian word *dard* (pain) rhymes well and is hence frequently used in connection with *ward* (man, specifically man of God). If this link with pain, that is part of the maturation of the man, and God appears quite often, Rumi has hinted at the contrast between the ascetic and the lover in another play with words: "What does the ascetic seek? [He seeks] mercy

(*rahma*). What is the lover looking for? Your blow (*zahma*). The former is dead in his robe; the latter is alive in his shroud." (In the Persian script *rahma* and *zahma* are merely differentiated by a dot.)

Love without pain is incomplete, because – as 'Attar writes – "the dish becomes a dish only through the salt in the kettle." The image of salt, and the putting of salt on wounds in particular, occurs frequently, especially in later poetry, in which salt is replaced by diamond dust in order to increase the feeling of pain. However, since bitter medicine cures the patient best, Dshami admonishes his readers not to throw themselves, like children, onto the sweets, but to take the bitter things.

To celebrate pain and its usefulness, the poets of the Orient have invented ever new images. Thus Rumi describes in an image that all Oriental travellers are familiar with how one wishes for a heavy burden because the reward will be the greater:

The day before yesterday, the carriers quarreled among
Themselves
"You must not carry! I want to carry his load!"
Since all saw something useful in pain,
Everyone snatched the load off the other.

However, Rumi expressed the truth that pain is necessary in order to come closer to the highest spiritual experience in a much more profound way. This is the story in the Koran about the Virgin Mary who, when going into labor, grasped the trunk of a dead date tree (Sura 19) which then showered her with dates. It forms the basis of Rumi's little parable in which the divine birth is articulated in the soul half a century before Meister Eckhart:

It is the pain that guides man. So long as there is no pain, no passion, and no longing love in his work, he will not strive for it. ... So long as Mary did not feel her labor pains, she did not turn to the tree. "And the labor pains seized her under the trunk of a palm tree." (Sura 19/23) It was this pain that took her to the tree and the barren tree bore fruit.

Pain purifies man, and dying even more so. The Sufis loved the saying *mutu qabla an tumutu* ("die before you die"). This applied not merely to physical death, but also to the dying off of one's own base characteristics which were to be replaced bit by bit by higher, divine qualities. It is the self-sacrifice for a higher goal.

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If Halladsh, the martyr of divine love, who was cruelly executed in the year 922, exclaimed: “*uqtuluni, ya thiqātti* (“kill me, oh my friends, for my life is only in death”), his cries have inspired many Sufis and idealists in the Islamic world. He was indeed killed, but some of his parables have survived, above all the one about the flame and the butterfly. The butterfly that sees the candlelight, senses its warmth and finally plunges into the flame in order to unite itself with it by burning to death, appears in his *Kitāb at-ta wasin*. Goethe found this theme in a Persian poem and transformed it in his poem *Selige Sehnsucht* that culminates in a genuinely Sufist ending:

And as long as you do not have
This dying and coming into being,
You are but a gloomy guest
On this dark planet.⁵

Halladsh’s cry “Kill me, oh my friends” became the motif of all those who knew that kenosis is necessary to gain a new and higher life.

His lines appear in yet another place which is possibly even more important in our context. This is Rumi’s story of the jumping beans. As in so many of his parables, Rumi uses the image of being cooked to describe a person’s maturation process – some 700 years before Lévy-Strauss used the metaphor. The beans are being boiled in a pot and in their torment want to jump out of it. But the house-wife advises them that they had grown in the mild rain of God’s grace. Now they would have to suffer the fire of His ire and majesty for a little while in order to be able to gain admission to a higher life. By being eaten by man, they could become a part of him, and in the best of circumstances might even become “spiritualized”. That this was not seen as a mechanical development may be gleaned from the fact that the house-wife recited Halladsh’s lines to the boiling vegetables. To be killed and “desubstantiated” (*fana*), i.e., to give up their protective “pods”, will enable the jumping beans to reach a life at a higher level. To quote Dshunaid, *fana* means “the destruction of the lover in his attributes and affirmation of the beloved in his essence.” By giving up their existence, the tormented vegetables are able to develop and can be of use to man. For only if we dispose of ourselves, can we promote our progression toward a higher state. There is no end to

the images and parables in which the poets of the Islamic world have written about this fracturing, the metamorphosis through suffering: "How many pearls have you ground in the bowl of the days? It will turn into an eye ointment – carry on grinding! Carry on grinding!"

Though being rather useless otherwise, the stone that is being ground here can, as an ointment, give renewed shine to the tired eyes.

The grape juice must ferment in the cask to become wine;
The raw cow hide must survive the painful process currying
In order to become fine leather;
The nut-shell must be cracked in order to find the sweet
Kernel and the delicious oil;
The oyster must be prised open to obtain the pearl.

In short, the entire life is basically a sequence of sufferings, sacrifices, everyone of which will lead to a higher life and an even more precious sacrifice. For Rumi, bread appears to be the most telling example. At first the field is torn up by the plough; the seedling is then squashed under the weight of the soil. Once the grain has sprouted, it will be threshed and ground. The flour is baked in the hot oven; and finally the bread is chewed up by man's teeth in order to unite with him and to become within him first part of his body and then of his mind. It is necessary to be broken in order to obtain full grace. This is why Rumi writes: "Oh, water of life, your torrents have pulled us away! You now have permission to break our jug!"

To be broken means redemption, liberation from a world of contrasts, return to the happiness of liberty. As the Indo-Persian poet Bedil (d. 1721) puts it in whose work the term *shikast* ("breaking") emerges as the central theme: "If you are ordained to crack open like a flower bud, you will hear the sound of the breaking of your own chains."

It may be possible to explain Bedil's predilection for the notion of *shikast* by reference to the political condition of the slowly collapsing Mogul empire. But this would be a simplification. Certainly, the theme of breaking has been central to Sufist literature for centuries before then. The Sufis not only knew about the need to suffer in order to achieve purification; they were also

familiar with a word of God, not to be found in the Koran, that they cited frequently. "God who is not comprised by heaven and earth, but who holds the heart of His faithful servant" (as another such word puts it), gave the following promise: "I am with those whose hearts are broken for the sake of Myself!"

Since, according to the Oriental folklore, ruins always contain treasures, the connection between the broken heart and the treasure is similarly made in various ways. Rumi expresses it most clearly when he asks: "Wherever there are ruins, there is the hope of finding a treasure. Why don't you search for the treasure 'God' in the devastated hearts?" And here the circle is closed with *hadith qudsi*, our initial starting point: God, the hidden treasure, not only reveals Himself to the world, but He is also the most precious treasure in the ruins (or may we say "chaos"?) of the loving and suffering hearts.

Similarly burning can serve as an image. If it was in the first instance the butterfly that plunged into the flame, all "desubstantiation" is to some extent a burning in the purifying flame of love. In the conception of antiquity and the Middle Ages all elements are in some form contained in all composite things. Accordingly the element of fire that is hidden in straw will be liberated from its casing and united with its actual primordial element, even if the burning has the outward appearance of destruction. In effect, it merely loses its external material life. If, according to a famous early saying of the Sufis, the lover asks the loved one, what his sin amounts to, he receives the reply: "Your existence is a sin that is comparable to no other one." An individual existence that places itself next to God, is indeed the worst sin a Muslim can commit. This is *shirk*, to consort something with God. This is why we find many allusions to the "sword of *la*", i.e., the first word of the confession of faith. *La*, meaning "it does not exist", looks, in its graphic version, indeed like to two-edged sword or a pair of scissors. It is designed to cut off what exists, or is believed to exist, "apart from God", and this included the human "I". For the same reason the theme of execution through decapitation assumed an important place in the mystically inspired literature. We might think of the Sufist transformation of the story of Sorathi in Hindu literature. Here the king permits the singer, who sings him of divine love, to cut his head off.

The lover, who experiences the insoluble link between love and death, the *eros thanatos*, will recognize that the sword that kills him was – as an Indian poet put it – hardened with the water of life. And one of the early Sufis of Baghdad once said: “There is nothing good in love without death.” The lover also knows the story according to which the Baghdad mystic Shibli (d. 945) asked God after the execution of Halladsh: “Why are you killing those who love?” And God is said to have replied: “Who is killed by his love toward Me, I (or My beauty) will be his reward.” And Rumi adds in one of his Arabic verses: “When you realize that you are killing me, you, oh my murderer, will be my reward!” Is there greater bliss than to be rewarded by the Absolute Beauty, by the unspeakable presence of God? This is why the poets have followed Halladsh’s example and have seen that the experience of unity will kill them. As Yunus Emre, living in medieval Anatolia, wrote: “I take a sip from the wine of unity; I shout ‘I am the Truth’ [and] I go to the gallows, Lord!”

It may be asked why the trial is supposed to be so necessary for the process of maturation in general and for lovers and holy men in particular? Rumi recounts God’s reply who spoke these words to the lover: “I want to fill you with sorrow and tears in order to screen you from the gaze of the evil ones. Through sorrow I make you bitter like bile, so that the evil gaze not fall upon you.” It is God’s jealousy that keeps His friends hidden “under His domes” as if they were brides whom no-one is allowed to see and of whom He desires that they devote themselves to Him.”

However, for the true lover this apparent cruelty is a sign of grace. Rumi has tried to explain this with a parable taken from Matthew 8/10. This is the story of Jesus who during a rainstorm sought refuge in a jackal’s den. But God chased him away because his presence disturbed the jackal’s puppies, whereupon Jesus exclaimed: “The jackal’s puppies have a refuge, but Mary’s son has no refuge, no place where he might live.” Rumi continues: “Even if the jackal’s puppies have a home, they do not have a lover who would drive them from it.” He also views God’s jealousy and cruelty as a “fine robe that He displays especially for you.” The loving assumption of apparent cruelty thus changes the latter into grace.

As emerges from Rumi's great poem about the need to travel, the notion of the path on which there occurs a noble transformation through the alchemy of love appears next to the symbolism of the path in general. The Sufis have described this path (*tariqa*) in countless images and parables. Thus 'Attar has written about the journey of thirty birds of the soul who recognize at the end of a long way that they are themselves the *Simirgh*, the primordial bird. Sana'i and Rumi liked to use the image of a ladder that leads to heaven, or rather each of whose steps opens up new heavens: "The path becomes more and more endless with every step; the man on it [becomes] more confused by the hour."

Yet, what does the person learn who has experienced the many little deaths and has gone through darkness and suffering and who has completed his journey, at least as far as it can be described? As Dshunaid says, this person walks "from the narrowness of the time-bound signs out into the open spaces of the fields of eternity." And there he may also experience how pain tips into a process of healing: "The desire of the drop is to expand into an ocean, once pain transcends the boundaries, it becomes a cure."

All mystics have spoken of man's metamorphosis, and the Delhi theologian Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) has used a particularly attractive image for this: Man is ice (just as Rumi similarly views individual existence as frozen); he is put on a fire in a kettle and melts; the water warms up, comes to the boil and evaporates; he thus approaches the heat of divine love; he becomes – as one might say in line with our topic – amorphous, returns to a state of shapelessness, of the undifferentiated.

"Steam" is one of the images with which this metamorphosis might be described. But the image that is most frequently used in this connection is that of the sea, the ocean, from which everything originates and to which everything returns. The water appears in the shape of drops, of waves, of foam, of humidity that rises from it. The humidity turns into clouds that return to the sea in the shape of rain drops where they either dissolve or, inside an oyster, turn into a pearl.

In these circumstances it comes as no surprise that Sohni, one of the heroines of Sindhi mysticism meets her death in the River Indus where she is united with her eternal lover. The disintegra-

tion of the boat in the face of God's violent presence is a frequent image to capture the dissolution of the human being within the divine. And when the wave of God's word crashes into him, even the planks of 'fear' and 'hope' will break that have carried man through this life.

There is no lack of other images to describe the relationship between the primordial source and the revealed world. There is the desert that takes the shape of dunes; or the piece of wood from which the chess pieces are carved that face each other in a match (as a Malaysian Sufi expressed it). The image of ink is typical for the Islamic world, however. This ink appears in characters which, however different they may look, nevertheless emanate from the same primordial source. The Sufis began quite early to use the images of calligraphy to symbolize the transformation of the amorphous into the ordered cosmos. At about the same time (around 900), this calligraphy also emerged as a well-arranged art form. Thus there arises from ink, the divine essence, a dot, the *ahadiyya* as a first unspecified phenomenon. Next comes the *alif*, the first letter of the alphabet, that is represented by a vertical stroke. All other letters are formed in accordance with its measure, just as Adam was created "in the image of God". *Alif* is also the first letter of the word Allah and it has the numerical value of one. It is thus an ideal symbol for the primordial phenomenon of the *deus revelatus*.

The primordial source also appears as reeds from which flutes (and also the writing pens) are cut. As Rumi put it at the beginning of his *Mathnanwi*: "Ever since I was cut from my homeland's reeds, all the world joins me in my wails." The sound of the flute reminds man of his separation from his origins and awakens in him a longing to return to it – just as the Turkish folk poet recognizes in the screeching and squeaking of the water wheel the expression of his longing for the forests in his homeland.

The mystic poet may be compared to the flute. Yet, if the experience of unity, of longing and fulfillment can be expressed in pure music, is it possible then to put it into words that belong to the realm of logic? Is not the *dhkir*, the thousandfold repetition of a divine name or of a confession of faith that is so useful for polishing the heart and for making it more receptive to reflect the divine light – is this *dhkir* not a veil at the very moment when *dhkir*,

dhakir, and *madhkur* become one, when we no longer think of God because this would mean thinking of a dualism?

Besieged by feelings, can the poet in fact say anything about his return into the Eternally One? Perhaps he will succeed if he uses Rumi's images:

No one may solve the secret of the friend -
You listen to the content of the stories:
You listen to the content of the stories:
In sagas, fairy tales from bygone days,
The friend's secret is more easily expressed,

The return to unity, to the desert of unity, has frequently been depicted by writers with reference to Madshnun who, as is indicated by his name, was "obsessed", and whose love of Laila had led to his collapse. Having left the city of rational thought, he now lived in the desert of unity. Rumi has interpreted Madshnun's secret through a nice little play of words with the name of Laila and lail, the term for "night": "Embrace Laila 'night', oh Madshnun! The night is the abode of the confession of unity, and the day is reunion and number."

What immediately comes to mind here is the juxtaposition of *wahdāt al-wudshud*, "the unity of what exists", and of *kathrāt al'ilm*, "the diversity of knowledge", as developed by the representatives of the Ibn 'Arabi School: the diversity of the non-divine world that lies in front of us in bright daylight and returns to the darkness of the Absolute Being. While in the desert, Madshnun spoke only of Laila. His listeners may have thought his words absurd, for we can only allude to the reunification in non-logical language: "The secret that is in the heart, – it cannot be a sermon! You can say it on the gallows. But from the pulpit? No!"

With these lines Ghalib hints at Halladsh's fate, who ended on the gallows and as a martyr became *shahid*, i.e., a witness to the unity of God. At least the legend has it that he was executed because he had said *Ana'l-haqq*, "I am an Absolute Truth", "I am God" – a statement that, however it may have been interpreted, pervades *basso ostinato* almost the entire mystic literature of Islam. It represents a typical *shath*, a "theopathic pronouncement", or – as Corbin translated it – a "paradox" in the spiritual sense. As defined by the classic Arab authors, a *shath* is derived from *shataha*,

the vigorous movement of the sieve during the grain harvest; it can also mean the overflowing of water from a container that is too small. Man who can no longer contain God's richness and who then says things that are illicit or appear senseless, will utter a *shath* like this, and not surprisingly the 'sober' mystics have compared Halladsh to an all too shallow container that could not take the inspiration and hence made forbidden statements.

As the Sindhi mystic Qadi Qadan says in the early 16th century: "If the Indus River is at flood stage, the canals will overflow – the love of the lover is too big for my own soul!" With these lines he aptly describes that state of the person who "has found". However, *wadsh* ("to find") is the expression for ecstasy – an ecstasy in which, shocked by the recognition of the Absolute One "that blinds the sharp mind and confuses the thoughtful person", it is only possible to resort to the use of paradox. Meanings become interchangeable.

Immersed in unity, the mystic learns that everything can be everything else. As the ecstatic folk poets of Anatolia or of the plains of Indo-Pakistan see it, there is no difference between Pharaoh and Moses, between Halladsh and his judge, and, in Indian poetry, not even between Ahmad (i.e. Muhammad, the prophet) and Hanuman, the helpful monkey of the Indian tradition. Such poems have given the Sufis the reputation that they are pure pantheists. We propose to be more cautious and believe that they returned to the the time before the "day of the primordial contract" when God addressed the souls that had not yet been created with the words: "*Alastu bi-rabbikum* – am I not your Lord?" And they replied: "Yes," while simultaneously taking all trials, i.e., *bala*, upon themselves which the Creator had for them until the Last Judgment.

What the poets of Anatolia and of the Indian river plains expressed in fulsome verses is basically the objective of all Sufis. Dshunaid, the master of the sober tradition, had defined this goal around the year 900 with the words that the searching man aims to be what he was when he did not yet exist, i.e. to disintegrate during the time prior to the schism into subject and object.

When he enters this world of unity, there is neither space nor time, neither logical differentiations nor kinship relations. This is what Halladsh writes in the poem that has repeatedly been cited here:

Sun at Midnight

Kill me, oh my friends.

...

Look how I, one of the elders
Who strives for the highest ranks,
Have now become a child,
Devoted only to the mother's breast,
Resting in the salty soil,
In the deepest darkest trenches!
It is miraculous that my mother
Gave life to her father
And that my young daughters
Now surround me like my sisters.
Neither adultery nor the change of times
Have yielded these events!

It is the *nunc aeternum* that he has now reached, the *waqt*, the Nu, where the divisions have been overcome; or, as Iqbal put it aptly, where the "heretic's belt of serial time" has been torn to shreds. This is the moment that creates the paradoxes. For, as Rumi knew, words tend to veil the true experience: "To speak means to cover up the windows, the deepest expression [means] to hide the words. Sing like a nightingale as you have the rose before you so that others will not smell its fragrance...."

Especially Jalaluddin Rumi has repeatedly experienced this tension, this compulsion to write poetry and to articulate the secret, while veiling it at the same time. He did not want to write and yet felt that "if I do not speak, my mouth will split." His lyric poetry is thus a continuous ecstasy and yet it is restrained. He uses traditional forms, but idea flows from ideas, image from image; his alliterations and rhythmic repetitions give his verses, particularly those from the earliest period, more the appearance of flowing music than that of an intellectual, logically constructed, and well ordered poetry, considering also that the Arabic and Persian word for this genre is *nazm*, "order".

He has always written about how the sour grape of the intellect is transformed into an intoxicating wine. His lyrics reads like products of a swirling quick-step. Both aspects of religious experience are inseparably linked with the round dance that his son institutionalized and that became the trademark of the Mevlevi, the dancing dervishes.

Rumi knew both paths along which to return to the divine closeness or to unity from the intellectual contemplation of the world, from the chains of matter that is bound by time and space.

He speaks of the journey to *kibriya*, the radiant divine halo that, according to a *hadith qudsi*, is "Gods mantle" – the mantle that covers the divine sun whose brightness makes it invisible. And yet it gives an inkling. This, he knows, was once upon a time the homeland of the soul. However, he also knows 'adam, the "non-being" – a term that may be associated with the unformed world of "chaos". It may be identified with that "box of unity" into which 'Attar, Rumi's predecessor, makes the puppetier throw the broken puppets at the end of his show so that they rediscover the dark unity.

The two paths appear united in *sama'*, which means to die in the world and to swirl in an eternal dance of the free spirits around the sun that never rises or goes down and that orders and harmonizes the atoms in a magnetic field. For Rumi the dance is born with the word of creation, that, like a first performance, accompanies the non-beings who are waiting for the manifestation of their coming to life when they enter with a joyous swirl. The circle comprises the entire world, from the lowest dust to man. And when the play of love, that is higher than being and non-being, begins, the child dances at her mother's side, the dead dance in their shrouds, and the angel dances with the devil.

"Who recognizes the power of this round for he knows how love was killed – Allah Hu!" This is how Rückert has translated Rumi's thoughts on the round. It symbolizes the fact of its liberation from the power of terrestrial gravity and to revive it in the circle of the sun at the center. We may assume that his aim was that of a butterfly that approaches a candle: the hope of arriving, beyond the world of colors and fragrances, of sounds and senses, where the spirit plunges into *Sibghat Allah* (Sura 2/138), into the "cask of divine color" where all divergent and opposite colors disappear in the sun of absolute unity; where they become a unique color that is simultaneously dark day and luminous night since, beyond all differences, it is seized by an understanding – because it is the hidden treasure from which all things emanate.

Notes

1. M. Iqbal, *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1930), 81. Quotations that are not footnoted may be found in the following works by the author: *Rumi. Ich bin Wind und Du bist Feuer* (Cologne, 1978); *Gärten der Erkenntnis*, (Cologne, 1982; *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam* (Cologne, 1985); *Liebe zu dem Einen. Texte aus der Mystik des Islam* (Zürich, 1986); *Ibn 'Ata Allah. Bedrängnisse sind Teppiche voller Gnaden* (Freiburg, 1987).
2. J.W. von Goethe, *Zahme Xenien*, Book Six.
3. M. Iqbal, *Six Lectures*, 81.
4. J.W. von Goethe, *West-Östlicher Diwan* (Buch Suleika).
5. *Ibid.* (Selige Sehnsucht).