

# Presence with God<sup>1</sup>

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For the past twenty years or so, I have been struggling to express Ibn al-'Arabi's technical terminology in an English idiom that will preserve the sense carried by his writings in their original context. With this end in view, I have attempted to establish a repertoire of technical terms in English – words that can be more or less adequate, once re-defined for the purposes of the discussion, to carry over the meaning of the original Arabic. One of the terms that I have given up trying to translate is *wujûd*, which is, I presume, what the organizers of this conference had in mind by the term 'Being'.

The first problem we face in using the word 'Being' is its notorious vagueness, a problem that is also present with the word 'existence', which is more often used to translate *wujûd*. A more serious problem is on the Arabic side, where *wujûd* means literally 'finding' and 'to be found'. Ibn al-'Arabi highlights this side of the meaning in such expressions as *ahl al-kashf wa'l-wujûd*, 'the folk of unveiling and finding', or *ahl al-shuhûd wa'l-wujûd*, 'the folk of witnessing and finding'. These are the gnostics, the highest of the Folk of God, and what they find, of course, is God.

An extremely important implication of the word *wujûd* that comes out when we translate it as 'finding' is that *wujûd* is not simply something that is there to be found. *Wujûd* also finds, which is to say that awareness and consciousness are among its essential attributes. Hence *wujûd* is not simply 'to exist' or 'to be', it is also 'to be alive' and 'to be aware'. Ibn al-'Arabi frequently reminds us of this fact, as in the many passages where he comments on Qur'anic verses such as 'Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies God'

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(57: 1). 'Being' and 'existence' in English obviously do not have this connotation and, even when we apply the word *Being* to God, we know that God has knowledge and awareness because we say so, not because the very word demands it.

One of the problems that come up when we think in terms of 'being' and 'existence' becomes obvious when we glance at the history of Western thought, where we find scientists, philosophers, and even some theologians who look upon consciousness as an epiphenomenon of existence or as a late-comer on the cosmic scene. By and large, modern people are comfortable thinking that 'existence' came before consciousness, or that living things gradually evolved from dead and inanimate being. But for Ibn al-'Arabi and much of Islamic theological thinking, no universe is thinkable without the omnipresence of life and awareness. The very word that is employed to refer to the underlying stuff of the universe – *wujûd* – is understood by them to express this.

On a practical level, the most important problem in attempting to translate *wujûd* is that of consistency. When Ibn al-'Arabi employs it, he means the same thing in each case, though, of course, he may be emphasizing one nuance rather than another. In Arabic, the word applies to everything. God has *wujûd*, or rather, God is *wujûd*, and everything else also has *wujûd* in one mode or another, failing which, we could not discuss it. In English, one cannot use the same word for every mode of *wujûd* without causing all sorts of confusion. Often people resort to capitalization to indicate that in one place the *wujûd* of God is meant, but in another place the *wujûd* of something else is meant. The problem here is that Ibn al-'Arabi often does not specify which *wujûd* he has in mind, because he is discussing it generically. If we use capital letters in English, we will think that he means God's *wujûd* and, if we use small letters, we will think that he does not mean God's *wujûd*. In fact he may mean neither, or he may mean both.

Enough has been said to indicate why I am not happy with the word 'Being', so from here on I will use the term *wujûd*.

As for the word 'presence', this has its own special problems. If one wants to translate the English term back into Arabic, the two most obvious choices are *hadra* and *hudûr*, two words from the same root. However, the meanings of the two terms are significantly different, and I suspect that Ibn al-'Arabi would only use the first along with *wujûd*, whereas it is the second that is implied in the title of the conference. Hence, if I am correct, a fundamental misreading of the Shaykh's position on *wujûd* is implied in this title. Nonetheless, it is a propitious misreading, since it brings out important issues and can be used to illustrate some of Ibn al-'Arabi's key teachings.

The basic distinction between the terms *hadra* and *hudûr* is that the first is used typically to designate the presence of God or some divine reality, whereas the second is used to designate our experience of the presence of God. These two are not the same thing. Ibn al-'Arabi often explains the distinction by commenting on the Qur'anic verse, 'He is with you wherever you are' (Q. 57:4). Our whole problem is that God is with us, but we are not with Him. The fact that He is with us may be expressed with the term *hadra*, but our achievement of the vision of God's presence can only be expressed with the term *hudûr*, not *hadra*. But this is rough and schematic, so I want to look more closely at exactly how Ibn al-'Arabi uses the two terms.

For Ibn al-'Arabi and his followers, *hadra* is roughly synonymous with English 'domain' and is almost always used along with some attribute or quality. Ibn al-'Arabi himself uses the term most commonly in conjunction with various divine names. For example, Chapter 558 of the *Futûhât*, one of the longest chapters in the work, is dedicated to explicating the meaning of the divine names, and each name is dealt with in a subsection that is headed by the title, 'the presence of'. Thus we have, *hadrat al-khalq*, 'the presence of creation', and the topic is the divine name Creator. So also we have the presence of mercifulness, the presence of peace, the presence of exaltation, the presence of form-giving, and so on. In each case, the topic is the relevant divine name. What the use of the term *hadra* implies here is that, in each case, a divine name has a domain or a sphere of influence. This seems to be what Ibn al-'Arabi means when he says, 'As for each

divine name, that is a presence' (*wa kull ism ilâhî fa-huwa hadra*).<sup>2</sup>

Although Ibn al-'Arabi himself uses *hadra* to refer to the presence of each and every divine name, his followers picked up on one particular expression, and in later times this became by far the most common usage of the term. This is *al-hadrat al-ilâhiyya*, 'the divine presence', that is, the sphere of influence of the name God, that is, Allah. This name God is the 'all-comprehensive name' (*al-ism al-jâmi'*), because all the other divine names refer back to it. In Ibn al-'Arabi's terms, 'the divine presence' is the domain in which the name God exercises its influence, and that domain is *wujûd* and all its concomitants, or, in other terms, God and the whole universe. Then the 'divine presences' – in the plural – are all the domains in which the divine names exercise their effects and, since the divine names are, from one point of view, innumerable if not infinite, the Shaykh writes, 'The divine presences can hardly be counted'.<sup>3</sup> When Ibn al-'Arabi uses the term *al-hadra* without an accompanying attribute, he seems to have the Divine Presence in mind. Thus, in one passage, he defines 'the Presence' in terms of a standard theological hierarchy that is typically used to refer to God and to the whole domain of His influence. He writes, 'The Presence in the common usage of the Tribe is the Essence, the attributes, and the acts'.<sup>4</sup>

Sadr al-Din Qunawi, Ibn al-'Arabi's most influential disciple, seems to have coined the expression 'the five divine presences', referring to the five domains in which the name God exercises its influence in a global fashion. In Qunawi's terms, the first presence is the divine knowledge, which 'embraces all things' (Q. 40: 7). Hence the divine knowledge, by embracing everything, whether divine or created, delineates the total sphere of influence of the name God. However, this is on the level of God Himself, within His own nonmanifest knowledge. The second presence is the spiritual

2. *Futûhât al-makkiyya*, Bulaq, 1911, IV, 318. 18. (Reference numbers refer to volume, page and line, respectively.)

3. *Ibid.*, 318. 16.

4. *Ibid.*, 407. 32. For more on the Divine Presence, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Albany, NY, 1989, Ch. 1, and *passim*.

world, which manifests the full range of the properties of the name God in the appropriate spiritual modes of existence. The third and fourth presences are the imaginal and corporeal worlds, and the fifth presence is the perfect human being, who is the 'all-comprehensive engendered thing' (*al-kawn al-jâmi*'). The divine presence specific to the perfect human being is the whole of reality on every level, which is to say that he experiences simultaneously the first four levels in their fullness and total integration. After Qunawi, 'the five divine presences' becomes a standard discussion among Sufi theoreticians, though a wide variety of schemes are offered to explain exactly what it signifies.<sup>5</sup>

I said that Ibn al-'Arabi typically uses the term *hadra* in conjunction with an attribute, most commonly, but not always, a divine attribute. One of the places where he uses the term in conjunction with other sorts of attributes is in discussions of cosmology, where he often refers to the 'three presences', meaning the three worlds, and this, of course, is one source for Qunawi's elaboration of the presences into five.<sup>6</sup> Thus, employing basic Qur'anic terminology, Ibn al-'Arabi refers to the two fundamental presences as those of the unseen and the visible, or, more literally, the 'absent' and the 'witnessed', and he refers to the presence of imagination as the place where the two come together. He writes:

The cosmos is two worlds and the presence is two presences, though a third presence is born between the two from their having come together. The first presence is the presence of the absent, and it possesses a world called the 'world of the absent'. The second presence is the presence of sense perception and the witnessed; its world is called 'the world of the witnessed' and is perceived by eyesight [*basar*], while the

5. For some of the most important early examples, see Chittick, 'The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qûnawî to al-Qaysarî', *The Muslim World*, 72 (1982), pp. 107–28.

6. In another context, Ibn al-'Arabi writes of various presences that God has made known to His servants so that they may come to know Him in a variety of modalities, such as witnessing, conversing, listening, teaching, and engendering (*Fut.*, II, 601. 18; partly translated in *Sufi Path*, p. 226).

world of the absent is perceived by insight [*basîra*]. That which is born from the coming together of the two is a presence and a world. The presence is the presence of imagination, and the world is the world of imagination.<sup>7</sup>

It is plausible that by 'In the Presence of Being' the organizers of the conference had in mind the Arabic expression, *fî hadrat al-wujûd*. I have not noted this particular expression in Ibn al-'Arabi's writings, but he does, on one occasion that I know of, refer to *al-hadrat al-wujûdiyya*, 'the *wujûdî* presence', employing the adjective derived from *wujûd*. On several occasions he also employs the same expression in the plural, and in these cases he is referring to the worlds of the universe.<sup>8</sup> On the one occasion that I have found where he uses the expression in the singular, he means everything that exists in the cosmos. In the passage, he is referring to his doctrine of Nondelimited Imagination (*al-khayâl al-mutlaq*), or the fact that the whole universe is nothing but imagination, which is to say that it stands halfway between *wujûd* and utter nonexistence. The universe is an image of *wujûd* in a nonexistent domain. It follows that, even though we divide what we perceive into sensory and imaginal, in fact everything is imaginal. Ibn al-'Arabi writes:

The whole cosmos takes the forms of raised-up images, for the *Wujûdî* Presence is only the Presence of Imagination. Then the forms that you see become divided into 'sensory' and 'imaginalized', but all are imaginalized.<sup>9</sup>

Although Ibn al-'Arabi uses the expression the '*wujûdî* presence' here, in this sense of the term, 'In the Presence of

7. *Fut.*, III, 42.5.

8. Su'ad al-Hakim refers to five instances (once without the definite articles, and three times in the plural) – *Fut.*, III, 525.25, IV, 203.18, 24, 27, *Mawâqî' al-nujûm*, p. 18 (p. 17 in the Muhammad 'Ali Sabih edition of 1965) (al-Hakim, *Ibn 'Arabî wa mawâdd lughâ jadîd*, Beirut, 1991, pp. 108, 154). One can add to these instances *Fut.*, II, 241.10 (plural); this passage, translated in *Sufi Path*, p. 223 (with the expression rendered as 'ontological presences') is a good example of how the Shaykh uses the term.

9. *Fut.*, III, 525.25.

Being' is precisely where everything is, without any exceptions, because absolutely everything, wherever it may be, is found or exists. And this Presence of *wujûd* is no different from the Divine Presence. As the Shaykh writes, 'There is nothing save the Divine Presence, and it consists of the Essence, the attributes, and the acts'.<sup>10</sup> Or again, 'There is nothing in *wujûd* save the Divine Presence, which is His Essence, His attributes, and His acts'.<sup>11</sup>

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Even without the subtitle announced for the conference – 'Preparation and Practice according to Ibn 'Arabi' – everyone will have understood that what is meant by 'presence' is a presence with God that is to be achieved in some way or another, a presence that presumably we do not now have. After all, it is possible to recognize that everything dwells in the Divine Presence without this making any practical difference in one's life. The Qur'an itself, as mentioned, makes the point when it says, 'He is with you wherever you are' (Q. 57: 4). But to say that God is present with us is not the same as saying that we are present with Him. Presence with God needs to be achieved. It is the object of the spiritual quest. The whole problem is that people are not present with the God who is present with them.

The second Arabic term commonly translated as 'presence' is *hudûr*. The first thing that one needs to know about this word is that it is the opposite of 'absence' (*ghayba*) and cannot be understood without reference to it. The word 'presence' here is one of two correlatives and, like all correlatives in Ibn al-'Arabi's universe, it demands its own correlative. The two terms must be understood together for them to have any sense. In every case, to be present *with* one thing is to be absent *from* something else. These are issues in the spiritual journey because people are absent from God as long as they are present with creation. The goal is to be present with God and absent from creation. But let me look more closely at the term 'absence' and what it implies. Once this is clear, the fact

10. *Ibid.*, II, 173.33.

11. *Ibid.*, 114.14.

that presence with God needs to be established should be self-evident.

First, it should be kept in mind that *ghayba* or absence means basically the same as the Qur'anic term *ghayb*, which is commonly translated as 'unseen' or 'invisible', but which can better be translated as 'absent'. The absent is contrasted with *shahâda*, which is usually translated in this context as 'visible', but which in other contexts is usually translated as 'witnessing' or 'witnessed'. The universe, in Qur'anic terms, has two basic worlds or presences (that is, *hadra*) – the absent and the witnessed. God is 'Knower of the absent and the witnessed' ('*âlim al-ghayb wa'l-shahâda*), whereas human beings know only the witnessed. As for the 'absent', human beings must have 'faith' (*îmân*) in it, as the Qur'an asserts repeatedly. The later tradition usually differentiates between two sorts of absent domain. One is the spiritual world, created by God, and the other is God Himself, often called 'the absent of the absent' (*ghayb al-ghayb*) or the 'absolutely Absent' (*al-ghayb al-mutlaq*).

In short, the spiritual world and God Himself are absent from the perception of human beings. The goal is for people to perceive them as present. This vision of the absent things can be called *hudûr* or presence, and the only way to achieve it is by way of 'faith in the absent' (*al-îmân bi'l-ghayb*), which is the *sine qua non* of everything Islamic. I will not, however, investigate the issue of faith here, since that would lead us too far afield.<sup>12</sup>

In the usual Sufi technical terminology, 'absence' refers not to absence from God, but to absence from created things. To become absent from creation is to become present with God, since there is nothing other than these two, God and creation. Thus presence and absence are understood in terms of awareness and lack of it. Ibn al-'Arabi employs the term 'witnessing' (*mushâhada* or *shuhûd*) to refer to the state of presence, because the person who is present witnesses that with which he is present. Notice that this term comes from the

12. See *Sufi Path*, pp. 193ff.; Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, Albany, NY, 1992, pp. 6–9 and passim; Sachiko Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, New York, 1994, Part II.



same Arabic root that gives us the term 'witnessed' in the expression 'absent and witnessed'. Ibn al-'Arabi frequently uses this term 'witnessing' to refer not only to seeing with the eyes, but also to seeing with the heart, which is unveiling (*kashf*). Thus it is not surprising that he refers, on occasion, to the 'folk of unveiling and presence' (*hudûr*),<sup>13</sup> meaning the gnostics or the highest among the Folk of God. These are the same as the already mentioned 'folk of unveiling and finding' (*wujûd*), who are also called 'the folk of witnessing and finding'.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, *wujûd* is synonymous with *hudûr* (and also with *shuhûd*).

In his short chapter on absence in the *Futûhât*, Ibn al-'Arabi defines the term as follows:

'Absence' for the Sufis is the heart's absence from the states that occur to the creatures because of the heart's occupation with what arrives to it. If this is the case, absence derives only from a divine self-disclosure. As the Sufis define it, it is not correct for it to derive from a created arriver [*wârid*], for the absent person is occupied [with the arriver] and absent from the states of creation. It is through this that this group is differentiated from other groups. After all, the property of absence is found in all groups. But the absence of this group is through the Real from creation, so it is ascribed to them in respect of eminence and praise.<sup>15</sup>

Here the Shaykh tells us that the typical Sufi definition of the word makes absence refer to occupation with a divine self-disclosure while one is cut off from witnessing created things. Although absence from the senses and the world occurs to everyone – through sleep, disease, chemical intervention, and so on – only in this specific definition can absence be considered an eminent and praiseworthy state, since only here does it demand a presence with God.

In continuing his chapter on absence, the Shaykh describes

13. *Fut.*, II, 479.17, 20.

14. *Ibid.*, 389.22; III, 120.32–3.

15. *Ibid.*, II, 543.22.

various levels of absence among the spiritual travellers in keeping with the degree to which they have realized the Real. His descriptions are so short that I will quote them, though a thorough explanation would take a good deal of space:

In absence, the Folk of God are ranked in stages, even though they possess all these stages through the Real.

The absence of the gnostics is an absence through the Real from the Real.

The absence of those of the Folk of God below them is an absence through the Real from creation.

The absence of the great knowers through God is an absence through creation from creation. After all, such knowers have come to know that *wujûd* is nothing but God in the forms of the immutable, possible entities. Nothing becomes absent from him but the form of an entity's property in a Real *Wujûd*. Thus he becomes absent by the property of another entity's form, which gives within *wujûd* something that is not given by the first. The entities and their properties are creation. Hence this knower becomes absent only through creation from creation in a Real *Wujûd*.<sup>16</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabi concludes the chapter on absence by addressing not the specific Sufi sense of the term, but the more general issue of absence and presence as attributes of created things. Everything other than God, he tells us, is by necessity both absent from God and present with Him, because everything other than God is barred from God Himself by the utter inaccessibility of the Divine Essence, but, at the same time, immersed in *wujûd*, the Divine Presence, because there is nothing else. This is the Shaykh's most fundamental perspective on everything in the universe – each thing is an image. Each is God/not God, He/not He. He writes:

There is no entity among all the entities whose property is to witness everything, such that it might not be described by absence. Since there is no entity that possesses the description of encompassing everything through presence with

16. Ibid., 543.25.

everything – for that is one of the specific characteristics of God – there is no escape in the cosmos from both absence and presence.<sup>17</sup>

Thus ends the chapter on absence. In the next chapter – which, at eleven lines, is probably the shortest in the *Futûhât* – the Shaykh provides a brief explanation of what the Sufis understand by the term *hudûr*. He explains first that they mean ‘presence with God along with absence’,<sup>18</sup> that is, absence from creation. Then, after three lines of poetry, he speaks about the impossibility of being completely absent or completely present. No matter what the situation of any created thing may be, it is both absent from God and present with Him. The basic reason for this should be obvious – only God is God, and everything other than God, even the greatest of the prophets, must be absent from God in precisely the degree of the otherness. There can be no absolute presence with God, since that would demand absolute absence from the universe. Nothing can be absolutely absent from the universe save that which has no *wujûd* of its own in any mode whatsoever, but there can be no such thing.

You should know that there is no absence without presence, so your absence is from that with which you are present, because of the ruling authority of the witnessing. In a similar way, the ruling authority of subsistence annihilates you, because it is the master of the moment and the property.

As for the details in [the degrees of] the folk of presence, it is exactly like what we mentioned concerning absence.

Everyone absent is present and everyone present is absent, because presence with the totality is inconceivable. Rather, ‘presence’ is presence with the units of the totality [*âhâd al-majmû’*]. This is because the properties of the [divine] names and the entities are diverse, and the ruling property belongs to that which is present. If someone were present with the totality, the properties would counterbalance each other, and this would mean that they would impede each other. Then the whole situation would be corrupted.

17. *Ibid.*, 543.30.      18. *Ibid.*, 543.34.

Hence presence with the totality is not correct, whether for those who see their presence through the Real or those who see it through creation. After all, the property of the entities is like the property of the names in counterbalancement, diversity, and manifestation of ruling authority. So ponder what we have said! You will find knowledge, God willing.<sup>19</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabi is telling us here that it is impossible to be present with God Himself, because none is present with God but God. In other terms, he is telling us that no one can be present with *wujûd* as such, or with 'Being'. When people do gain what is called 'presence with God' (not 'presence with *wujûd*'), in fact they gain awareness of God's self-disclosure, and God's self-disclosure to them is nothing but themselves. It follows that no one is ever present with God as God, which is to say that no one is ever present with anything but himself. In *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (p. 105), I quoted a passage in which Ibn al-'Arabi explains this point using the term 'presence'. Here, let me cite another passage on the same topic. However, here he explains the point while discussing the issue of 'intimacy' (*uns*) with God, which is the opposite of 'alienation' (*wahsha*). For our purposes, it would not be misleading to replace 'intimacy and alienation' with 'presence and absence', since the same argument applies in both cases. He writes:

The Qur'an calls God 'Independent of the worlds' [Q. 3:97]. We make Him independent of signifying. It is as if He is saying, 'I did not bring the cosmos into existence to signify Me, nor did I make it manifest as a mark of My *wujûd*. I made it manifest so that the properties of the realities of My names would become manifest. There is no mark of Me other than Myself. When I disclose Myself, I am known through the self-disclosure itself. The cosmos is a mark of the realities of the names, not of Me. It is also a mark that I am its support, nothing else.'

Hence the whole cosmos has an intimacy with God. However, parts of it are not aware that the intimacy they have is with God.

19. Ibid., 544. 3.

Each part of the cosmos must find an intimacy with something, whether constantly, or by way of transferral to an intimacy that it finds with something else. However, nothing other than God among the engendered things has any properties. Hence, a thing's intimacy can only be with God, even if it does not know this. When the servant sees his intimacy with something, that thing is one of the forms of God's self-disclosure. The servant may recognize this, or he may deny it. So the servant can feel repelled by the same thing with which he is intimate, but he is not aware, because of the diversity of the forms. Hence, no one lacks intimacy with God, and no one is alienated from any but God. Intimacy is an expansiveness, while alienation is a contraction.

The intimacy of the knowers of God is an intimacy with themselves, not with God, for they have come to know that they see nothing of God but the form of what they are. They have no intimacy with anything but what they see. Those who are not gnostics see intimacy only with the other, so they are overcome by alienation when they are alone with themselves.<sup>20</sup>

In various other passages of the *Futûhât*, Ibn al-'Arabi mentions presence with God and suggests some of what it implies. He associates it not only with witnessing, but also with remembrance (*dhikr*). Hence, he identifies the blameworthy absence, that is, the opposite of presence, with 'heedlessness' (*ghafla*<sup>21</sup>), certainly the most fundamental human shortcoming in Qur'anic terms.

In one passage Ibn al-'Arabi speaks of the astonishment of the angels when they descend upon the gnostic with something from God, for they find that he is already 'clothed in the robes of courtesy, divine presence [*al-hudûr al-ilâhî*] in taking from Him, light, and splendor'.<sup>22</sup> 'Courtesy' is for Ibn al-'Arabi an especially important technical term, and he discusses it far more often than he mentions presence. It is to do everything in the proper manner, which means acting in a way that always pleases God. The least actualization of courtesy is found in careful observance of the Shari'a. As the

20. *Ibid.*, 541.12.21. *Ibid.*, III, 540.22.22. *Ibid.*, 31.4.

traveler advances, he remains firmly rooted in all the details of the Prophet's Sunna as set down in the Shari'a, but he also actualizes the vast range of inner qualities that the outer activities demand. These inner qualities can lead eventually to 'divine presence', that is, presence with God and, as the Shaykh mentions in the just-cited passage, it can also lead to 'taking from Him', which is to say that the gnostic takes everything he has directly from God. Finally, as the passage says, the gnostic also becomes manifest with 'light' (*nûr*) and 'splendor' (*bahâ*), terms that allude to his having assumed all of God's character traits (*al-takhalluq bi akhlâq Allâh*).

The fact that presence has to do with God's character traits is brought out in a passage from Chapter 380 of the *Futûhât*, which is dedicated to explaining the meaning of the prophetic saying, 'The *'ulamâ* are the inheritors of the prophets.' As we know from the studies of Michel Chodkiewicz and others, 'inheritance' is one of Ibn al-'Arabi's key terms for expressing the special status of the Folk of God. In the chapter, he talks about two basic types of inheritance, sensory and suprasensory. The sensory inheritance pertains to words, activities, and everything that becomes manifest through states – that is, all the signs and marks given to the spiritual travelers when they experience the absent domains. In contrast, the suprasensory inheritance has to do with assuming the character traits of God and thereby gaining presence with God. Ibn al-'Arabi writes:

As for the suprasensory inheritance, it pertains to the non-manifest side of the states, such as purifying the soul of blameworthy character traits and adorning it with noble character traits. It also pertains to the remembrance of his Lord that the Prophet possessed in all his moments. This is nothing but presence [*hudûr*] and watchfulness [*murâqaba*] over God's traces in your heart and in the cosmos. Thus nothing falls to your eye, nothing occurs to your hearing, and nothing attaches itself to any of your faculties, unless you have, through it, a divine consideration and viewpoint [*nazar wa i'tibâr ilâhî*]. Through this you come to know the divine wisdom in that. Such was the state of God's Messenger.<sup>23</sup>

23. *Ibid.*, 502.11.

Given that there is no such thing as pure presence or pure absence, it should be obvious that there are degrees of presence and absence, or degrees of prophetic inheritance. It is here that the travelers meet dangers on the path to God. No one can ever be safe from God's deception (*makr*), not even the prophets. As the Qur'an itself says, 'No one feels secure against God's deception save the people who have lost' (7:99). Ibn al-'Arabi often discusses the dangers of deception on the path, and his repeated advice to the travelers is that nothing can preserve them from error save careful observance of the Sunna and the Shari'a. As he writes in one passage, 'If anyone desires that God give him good and preserve him from the calamities of deception, let him never let the Scale of the Shari'a drop from his hand!'<sup>24</sup>

In another passage of similar import, the Shaykh suggests that one of the major errors of the travelers, even the 'Folk of Presence', is their failure to observe God's commands and prohibitions. The chapter is dedicated to explicating the meaning of the term *waqt*, which means 'moment' or 'present moment'. The term is found in the famous aphorism, *al-sûfi ibn al-waqt*, 'The Sufi is the son of the moment'. However, this aphorism implies a certain passivity on the part of the traveler, and in this chapter the Shaykh explains that the Sufi should rather be *sâhib al-waqt*, 'the owner of the moment'. At the beginning of the chapter, he defines *waqt* in terms of the standard understanding as 'That through which and upon which you are in the time of the state'<sup>25</sup>. Here by 'state' (*hâl*) he means the situation at the moment, the actual situation of the thing at the time in question, which is this instant. In other words, the 'moment' is what comes to you from God and defines your own situation at any given time. We could paraphrase this by saying that the 'moment' is that which is present with you and with which you are present at the instant that divides the past from the future.

Toward the end of the chapter, Ibn al-'Arabi explains that the best of all the moments that people can have is for God

24. Ibid., II, 530.3. For the passage in context, see *Sufi Path*, pp.267-8.

25. *Fut.*, II, 538.35.

to give them the observance of the rulings of the Shari'a. He explains why this should be so as follows:

The intelligent person among the Folk of God is he who sees that all the good that pertains to the servant is found in what the Real has required through that which He has laid down as Shari'a for His servants and sent with His Messenger. When God employs someone in the Truth laid down as Shari'a, there is no solicitude of God toward him beyond this – for those who understand from God.

The 'moment' that is known from the side of the Real is identical with that with which the Shari'a addresses you in the state. So, be in keeping with the words of the Lawgiver in every state! Then you will be an Owner of the Moment, and this is a mark that you are one of the felicitous with God.

This, however, is rare in existence among the Folk of God. It belongs to certain individuals among them, those who are the folk of watchfulness. They are never heedless of God's ruling in the things.

Among the folk of presence with God in each thing [*ahl al-hudûr ma'a Allâh fî kull shay'*], it is here that the feet of one group slip. They are not heedless of God for the blink of an eye, but they are heedless of God's ruling in the things, or in some of them, or in most of them.

He who is not heedless of God's ruling in the things is not heedless of God. He is the one who brings presence with God together with His ruling. Such as these have greater knowledge and a more tremendous felicity. These are the owners of the moment that bestows felicity.<sup>26</sup>

Notice the importance that Ibn al-'Arabi places on 'felicity' (*sa'âda*) here. Felicity, as you know, is the Qur'anic term for the happiness that is achieved by the people of paradise. It is the opposite of 'wretchedness' (*shaqâ'*), which is the state of the people of hell. In Islamic terms, felicity is the goal of religion. Some Sufis, especially poets, have taken a rather dismissive attitude toward paradise, suggesting that Sufis do not desire the Garden, but rather the Gardener. Although some

26. *Ibid.*, 539.25.



passages in the Shaykh's writings might be read in these terms, for the most part he keeps a cool head and does not allow hyperbole to get the better of him. Hence he states explicitly and repeatedly that the goal of the Sufi path is not, as some people imagine, 'reaching God', since, in the final analysis, God cannot be reached. What the Sufis are really out to achieve is not oneness with God, but felicity.

\* \* \*

I can summarize by saying that the expression 'in the presence of Being' can be understood in Ibn al-'Arabi's terms in one of two ways. If we mean *fī hadrat al-wujûd*, then we have not said anything, because everything is already there. If we mean *fī hudûr al-wujûd*, this is either the inescapable situation of everything (if take *hudûr* and *wujûd* in loose senses), or it is impossible to achieve (if we mean the terms strictly, in which case God alone is present with His own *wujûd*). Nevertheless, there are degrees of *hudûr* and, in each case, the traveler is present with God's self-disclosures, not with God Himself. In other words, if we follow Ibn al-'Arabi's own terminology, we cannot move toward the 'Presence of Being', because we are already there. What we are really striving for is presence with specific self-disclosures of God in ourselves, self-disclosures that derive from divine names such as Guide, Compassionate, Forgiving, and Pardoning. Thus, the goal of the Sufi path cannot be to achieve the 'Presence of Being'. It is rather to achieve permanent happiness through following the guidance brought by the prophets.

I will conclude my paper by quoting a section from the penultimate chapter of the *Futûhât*. In this chapter, Ibn al-'Arabi summarizes the 'realities and mysteries' of all the 558 chapters that preceded it. Many of these short epitomes are notoriously difficult to decipher, and the English translation that follows will suggest some of the obscurities of the text. Nevertheless, the Shaykh's message here is straightforward enough, and it does not deviate from what he teaches on these matters elsewhere. He is saying that the Folk of God have not, in fact, been striving to achieve 'the Presence of God' since they know that they are already in His Presence.

Therefore they have exerted effort only to achieve the goal of life, which is to actualize permanent felicity through awareness of God's Presence in the appropriate modes – modes that cannot be discerned and achieved without prophetic guidance.

**He who is certain of emergence will never seek ascent**

Since you have no escape from returning to Him, you should know that you are at Him from the first step, which is the first breath. So do not weary yourself by seeking ascent to Him, for that is nothing but your emerging from your desire such that you do not witness it. For 'He is with you wherever you are' [Q. 57:4], so your eyes will fall on none but Him. However, it remains for you to recognize Him. Were you to distinguish and recognize Him, you would not seek ascent to Him, for you have not lost Him.

When you see those who are seeking Him, you will see that they are seeking their felicity in their path. Their felicity is the repulsion of pains from them, nothing else, wherever they may be.

The one who is completely ignorant is he who seeks what is already there, so no one is more ignorant than he who seeks God. If you have faith in His words, 'He is with you wherever you are', and His words, 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of God' [Q. 2: 115], you will recognize that no one seeks God. People seek only their felicity so that they will be safe from what they detest.<sup>27</sup>

27. *Ibid.*, IV, 424. 15.