



Beauty and Light:
Mystical Discourses by a Contemporary
Female Sufi Master

CEMALNUR
SARGUT

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Q: We have talked about love, patience, destiny, etc. and said how important these qualities are in our lives. Let us now turn to worship, which is obligatory for us as human beings and for our lives as a whole. The greatest form of worship is prayer. We'll try to describe its inner and outer aspects. Worship covers many aspects of our lives. It wouldn't be wrong to say, would it, that our entire life can be viewed as an act of worship? To begin, what is worship in its apparent sense? It is repeatedly explained in the Qur'an and frequently mentioned by Perfected Humans. If we were to speak about worship in its general meaning though, where would we begin?

A: I'd like to begin with a story about a knower of God (*arif bi'Llah*) who was listening to a sermon in a mosque. The Imam (prayer leader) of the mosque was speaking at length about hell. When the Imam began to explain in great detail how people would burn because of their sins, the *arif* was saddened and said, "O Imam! God is not going to ask us what you say He will. He is going to ask us only one thing, 'My servant, I was with you all your life; who were you with?'" Worship encompasses all the states and actions that will allow us to say, "I was with You!" A person's desire to be with their Beloved is what brings them to this level.

But outer actions are also called worship. Mevlana Rumi says, "Piety (*takva*)" – that is, the fire of worship – "has burned the world and everything except God. Then the lightning of God's self-disclosure (*tecelli*) struck, eventually burning piety itself." This is a very important point. What does it mean to say that everything begins with piety? Three levels of piety are spoken of here. In the first degree of piety,

what matters is to obey God's prohibitions. When a person falls in love, how easily they renounce so many things for their beloved, even the things they like, yes? What if this love is the love of God that has prevailed in a person? So performing prayer outwardly keeps a person away from all things declared unlawful by God. And if a person refrains from unlawful things, their love will increase. The more the love increases, the more a person will distance herself from everything except God. It is important to be clear, that this is not to say we should all become hermits. No. A person must see all beauty, and find God in all that beauty, as captured in the poem by my teacher Kenan Rifa'i:

Is Allah not Absolute Beauty?

Why should witnessing this be a sin?

All beauty is proof of (His) power

To witness this beauty is worship

When people arrive at this stage, they renounce everything that takes them away from God, as if these things never existed. The self-disclosure of God burns the human being. Due to the tremendous intensity of this disclosure, there is nothing left to exist, not even the form. That is, the human is completely annihilated in God's Essence. It is this state that Mevlana Rumi refers to as "drowning." Rumi says in *Fihi Ma-Fihi*, "Dip a bee in a honey barrel. The bee will no longer be able to move on its own. All its movement will be with the honey. What moves is the honey, not the bee. Outwardly there is still a bee, and the weight of the honey has increased as much as the weight of the bee. But what is moving is the honey." The human being arrives at this state. God becomes the speech with which he speaks and the sight with which he sees; God becomes the doer. But if you pay attention, you will note that to arrive at this state, Mevlana began with servitude; he began with non-existence. Prayer is to say, "I

love You, God” through different human actions and states. Underlying these actions are several types of worship, including sacrifice, unity, ascension, alms, purity of state (*halin zekati*), and purity of time (*vaktin zekati*). This is why prayer is the most important worship.

In the same way that a person dresses up before going to meet their sweetheart, people purify themselves before prayer. A believer enters the presence of God – their most beloved – in ritual purity, having made the ablution. This is not just a formality; it is extremely important. Even though a person may have showered and may be physically clean, if they plan to pray, they must go back and perform ablution with the intention of attaining ritual purity. The outer meaning of ablution is to purify the self of all physical impurities. But it has many inner meanings. What are these? To purify and cleanse our bodily limbs of their sins is an act of beauty and benevolence. The more that people serve humanity and sacrifice what they have – including their possessions, their health, and their state – the more their bodies are purified of their sins. The soul is purified when a person adopts the conduct of God, comprehends the meaning of the Prophet, lives according to the Prophet’s conduct, and is in a constant state of repentance. As for the purification of the secret, it is contingent on the relinquishing of all that is other than God. The person who performs ablution goes through all of these steps. The *arif* reminds him of what is required by saying the following words:

While washing our hands, we ask, “My Lord, please help to make our hands an instrument for good deeds!”

While washing our mouth, we say, “My Lord, please help us drink the wine of Kawthar!”

While washing our nose, we say, “My Lord, please make me smell the heavenly fragrances!”

While washing our face, we say, “My Lord, please illuminate my face just like you have illuminated the faces of Your beloveds.”

While washing our right arm, we say, “My Lord, please make me one of the repentant ones.”

While washing our left arm, we say, “My Lord, please make me of those who repent!”

While wiping our head, we say, “My Lord, make me among those of Your servants for whom there is neither fear nor grief!”

While washing our feet, we say, “My Lord, on that day when the feet of the hypocrites are made to slide, keep my feet firm on the Straight Path!”

And then we recite, “*Amantu bi’Llahi* (I believe in God).”

Q: Since we are going for a meeting and have an appointment with our Beloved, we must go in the most beautiful form, and we must prepare each of our limbs for the expression of this intention.

A: We remind ourselves of this, which means that we purify our body, soul, and mind.

Q: Ablution functions like a filter, doesn’t it?

A: Very true. There is a saying that “during prayer, a believer should not recite the Qur’an too loudly nor too softly,” in order to remain alert and aware. As Ibn ‘Arabi says, “Begin your worship as a servant so that God can become manifest through you. God’s manifestation does not occur unless you begin as a servant.” That’s why we begin our prayer as servants. This is what it’s all about.

We might ask, what is the purpose of prayer? As you know, God says in sura *al-Kawthar* (Abundance), “We have granted

Kawthar to you.” The *Kawthar* that is given here is to remind us that we have been granted a blessing. As noted by Junayd Baghdadi, “The color of the water depends on the vessel carrying it.” Similarly, our perception of the blessing also depends on the vessel. Which blessing, though? “We have granted to you the drunkenness and spiritual pleasure of the wine of *Kawthar* that comes forth from the Prophet,” and “We have bestowed upon you meaning from Our Meaning; We enlightened your spirit by way of the illuminated heart. We established your connection with Allah.” There is so much to be understood from this. In sum, “We have given you love.” So what should you do to remember this and be thankful for it? “Prostrate and sacrifice.”

Let us turn to the phrase “So prostrate and sacrifice.” The purpose of prostration is to rise to the level of being nothing during prayer, which you began as “I.” This is because God takes hold of us by our foreheads during prostration. If a person comprehends their nothingness, then God connects with their intellect, which knows its nothingness.

There is also sacrifice in prayer, isn’t there? So, prayer and sacrifice are mentioned side by side, meaning that these two should be together. The main purpose of sacrifice is to sacrifice the *nefis*. Just as we have to establish prayer in its outer form in order to understand its inner meanings, we must also establish sacrifice in its outer form by sacrificing an animal before we sacrifice our *nefis*. The inner meaning of sacrificing the *nefis* is to sacrifice the desires of *nefis*. If you don’t do this, you’ll become “cut off (*abtar*),” God forbid; your offspring, your meaning, and everything will be cut off. There are many lessons to be drawn from this. First, we understand the following: that we should “do this and keep doing this so that we can penetrate the real meaning.” The continuity of *Kawthar* is sustained through prayer, the

meaning of which is to sacrifice the pleasures of your *nefis*. These are intertwined. So what does it mean to sacrifice the pleasures of your *nefis*? Let's expand on this a little.

God says, "One edge of your two-edged sword (the sword of 'Ali) is opposition."

It means you will face all kinds of obstacles in your life. Your ideas will be challenged, but you won't allow these to detain you on your path. You will struggle, and there will be people who don't love you and will oppose you. All this opposition will enable you to cut the desires of your *nefis*. This is one edge of the sword. The second edge is the act of striving. If you continue to strive like the Prophet did, despite all these obstacles, this two-edged sword will cut the desires of your *nefis* and you will reach a state where your flesh will become beneficial to you. This is just like the sacrificed animal's meat, the portion that we bring home; in this case, it is in the home of your body that the meaning of God manifests. This makes both you and those around you peaceful, and you become beneficial for those around you that are spiritually poor.

It is stated in sura *Hajj* that in this sacrifice, three things play a role: the sword of *Şeriat*, the right conduct of Sufism (that is, the ability to see the Truth everywhere), and the great beauty that emerges when you cut off the desires of the *nefis*. All three of these allow you to serve as an example.

Q: This helps us to better understand the meaning of 'Ali, doesn't it? He did not say "I am divorced from the world" without any purpose.

A: 'Ali's sword is a sword of gentleness as well as chivalry. 'Ali is God's lion, and he did fight in battles; but, as you know, when his enemy spat in his face, he threw away his sword. He is this kind of lion of God. The man who spat in

his face became Muslim and asked, “Why didn’t you cut my head O ‘Ali?” ‘Ali said, “I cut the desires of your *nefis* with my sword of gentleness and knowledge, and look what a state you attained!” That is why this double-edged sword is the sword that sacrifices the *nefis*, and ‘Ali is its meaning. The Prophet said, “I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Ali is its gate.” ‘Ali is also the door of the Ka‘ba. In order for us to find God in our hearts, we need ‘Ali; that is, we need a friend of God (*veli*). Prayer contains sacrifice (*kurban*), hajj (*hac*), ascension (*mirac*), alms (*zekat*), and unity (*tevhid*).

Let us now turn to presence (*huzur*). As you know, prayer has two aspects. The first is to pray in peace. To pray in peace means praying in the presence, that is, feeling the self to be in the presence of God. That is the only way a person can elevate him or herself to God’s presence. But we don’t see God openly! So we can do two things: since we have been promised that “ascension (*mirac*) is in the prayer,”⁹⁰ and that “we will see (God),” but we are not yet at the level of seeing or witnessing God, so we begin the prayer as “I” and focus on the fact that God sees us. That’s how we can rise to the presence.

Abu Sa‘id al-Kharraz (d. 286/899), one of the greatest early Sufis, was asked, “How do you begin your prayers?” He answered, “As if you were standing in the presence of God on the Day of Judgment, when there will be no intermediary between you and Him. He will look at you and ask, and you will answer Him. You should stand there knowing that you are in the presence of the Sultan of sultans, and this experience will give you endless joy.”

The second aspect of prayer is to find peace and presence by obeying the divine command in the verse, “Prostrate before Adam.”⁹¹ Standing in front of the Present One (*Hazret*) allows a person to be present, comfortable, and content.

In so many verses in the Qur'an, prayer is termed "*salat*." *Salat* means separation from your home. It refers to our separation from the pre-eternal realm. Prayer becomes obligatory at age seven, and jurists maintain that this is so because a person who has been away from their real home for seven years gets homesick. Since worship reminds us where we have come from and helps us reach presence, it (worship) is extremely important. When we begin the prayer with an Imam, we say "*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great)." The meaning of this is, "O God, I sacrifice my *nefis* in Your Presence." In order to do this, we hold up our hands with our palms facing forward, meaning that we renounce both this world and the next. There is only me – the servant – and God. This is such an important state; it is the state of Muhammad. Prayer begins with the station of duality, which is also a station of nearness. Praise is offered for the Greatest One. The person continues to pray with the manifestation of the name of Muhammad at the level of nearness. During prostration, the truth of the Prophet emerges (*Ahmad*). It emerges with the manifestation of the name *Mahmud* (praised one) as well. And finally, the praying servant experiences the joy of being chosen (*Mustafa*).⁹² Prayer is the only worship in which the person enters as "I," and if the prayer is completed with meaning, they leave as "the chosen servant;" the servant reaches the station of nearness to God.

When we are about to slaughter our sacrificial animal, we again say "*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great)"; that is, we say the same words as when we sacrificed the *nefis* that was worthy of being killed. At that moment, the body is Ishmael, and the spirit like *Khalil* (Friend).⁹³ The spirit says "*Allahu Akbar*" to cut this body from its desires and ambitions. Then the body is purged of its lusts and carnal inclinations, and "*Subhanaka* (Glory be to you)" is recited. *Subhanaka* means that God

transcends everything.

Q: We always mention our dear Prophet. It is, of course, impossible not to mention him all the time. He is the crown on our heads and the light of our eyes. And there is prayer, which is the light of his blessed eyes. Prophetic sayings about prayer are as many as Qur’anic verses about prayer. The first five verses of sura al-Baqara (The Cow) list the qualities of those who have faith. It says, “Those who have faith in the Unseen establish their prayers and give of the provisions.” These verses make it clear that one of the main conditions of being faithful is prayer. We’ll come to the other two as well, but let us, if you like, start with prayer, the light (nur) of our Prophet’s eyes...

A: As you know, according to a *hadith*, the Prophet said, “I have been made to love three things from your world; women, fragrance, and the light of my eyes, prayer.” Grammatically, between two feminine nouns is the masculine noun “fragrance.” This order does not follow a conventional Arabic sentence structure. Hence, this grammatical order demonstrates that the Prophet was made to say this sentence by God in a state of absolute servitude, and that God willed him to say this sentence. Its inconsistency with other *hadith* – which illustrate his perfect use of Arabic grammar in speech – demonstrates this point. Now if you ask if this makes it any different from other sayings of the Prophet, of course it doesn’t. But the grammatical order does highlight the fact that the Prophet’s statement is a sign of faith in the unseen. In a way, creation is being explained here. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, God created man first by blowing His own spirit into him, and then He created woman, who is a part, and partner, and the other half. The Arabic order explains God’s existence and the creation of men and women. With the feminine, what

is spoken of is the *nefis*. This same explanation can be frequently found in religious literature. *Nefis* is the most important part of the body since it possesses the power to reach the station of the spirit and to mold a person's character. When we manage to cleanse the *nefis* of its worldly desires, it transforms into the spirit. Whereas previously it was called *nefis*, now, praise be to God, it is spirit. That's why the *nefis* is such a sublime station. It is the station of Zuleikha.⁹⁴

Why complain about the *nefis*? Is it fair to consider it unworthy?

It is a great blessing for you from the Sublime God.

It is your companion; don't look at it with disdain; use it rightfully.

By knowing your *nefis*, you can know God and the taste of union.

Can you arrive at your destination without the *nefis*?

At the end of your life, it (*nefis*) won't let you suffer separation.

Do not separate it (*nefis*) from knowledge and good conduct.

Appreciate its value, serve it as best as you can, and don't let it complain about you.

My words will have meaning only after spiritual training.

Benevolence for Ken'an! By curbing your *nefis*, you become a human being.⁹⁵

Q: If Zuleikha can attain perfection, this means that all women have the potential to attain perfection.

A: In one of his poems, 'Attar said, "Zuleikha was sitting by the road through which Joseph was supposed to pass. When she caught sight of Joseph, she let out such a heartfelt cry that

the whip (for Joseph's horse) caught fire from her cry. Joseph, unable to carry the whip anymore, threw it away. On seeing this, Zuleikha let out another cry, 'O God! Look at this! He is a great messenger, and I am but a poor woman. Yet when just a little bit of the fire that I carry in my illuminated heart touched his hand, he was unable bear it, and he threw the whip.'" 'Attar continued, "If it weren't for the Zuleikhas of the time, who would know the value of Joseph?" This means if it weren't for the Prophet, how else would God's meaning be known? Annemarie Schimmel, whom I love very much, was an expert on Rumi. In her book titled *My Soul Is a Woman* (which she dedicated to Samiha Ayverdi), she says, "Your spirit is the station of love." In this statement and that of 'Attar's, "woman" represents the *nefis*. When the Prophet said, "I was made to love women," he was referring to the necessity of the *nefis*, without which no spiritual progress is possible. Kenan Rifa'i made the same point when he said, "fragrance means everybody's fragrance, that is, their dis position (*meşreb*; Ar. *mashrab*)."

Q: This is a very important, isn't it? We might understand what women and prayer mean (in the Prophetic statement), but the term "fragrance" conveys an additional detail and it is beautifully expressed.

A: Unless we as a people accept each other's dispositions, there can be no mutual acceptance between us. There is a meaning behind each of the dispositions that God created, which must be understood. Without this understanding, there is no welcoming acceptance amongst people, and they will have a very difficult time reaching *tevhid*. The Prophet says, "In order to do all this, prayer is a must." Only in prayer can these meanings be illuminated; the eye of your illuminated heart starts to see these; prayer is ascension. A companion once told the Prophet that he hated garlic. The Prophet

interjected and said, “Don’t say you hate garlic; instead, say that you hate its smell. It is forbidden to hate the essence of anything.”

Q: When we look at the etymology of “Islam,” we see that it comes from the same root as “taslim (embrace),” “muslim (one who submits),” “salama (to accept)”... It means submission to God (having faith in the unseen).

A: There is a very important lesson in sacrificing the pleasures of the *nefis*. Consider the test of Abraham,⁹⁶ the decision he took regarding his son, and his son saying, “Father, do as you are commanded.” All this tells us that Ishmael, who was at the station of the *nefis*, was ready for these trials. Had he not been ready, there would have been no spiritual ascension. In other words, the *nefis* must be ready. Take, for example, when you go to a psychiatrist. Among the first questions that you are asked are, “Are you ready to cope with your disease? Do you acknowledge that you are ill?” Similarly, is your *nefis* confessing that it is ill? God first and foremost wants this confession from us. Only then does the ascension begin. The words of the *tekbir* – *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) – protects a person in prayer from worldly thoughts and helps a person declare the desires of the *nefis* as unlawful. And for the people of Truth, the words of the *tekbir* make placing anything beside God unlawful. To say the *tekbir* during prayer is to say, “I have sacrificed myself in Your presence.” The submission of Ishmael shows the submission of the *nefis* to the spirit. Only then can the body rid itself of all types of desire. This submission becomes very difficult for people who don’t pray. The knowers of God say, “Those who pray are like sacrificial animals cleansed and ready for sacrifice.” That is why prayer is indispensable. Now, having said *Bismi’Llah al-rahman al-rahim* (in the

Name of God, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful), let us turn to that magnificent chapter of the Qur'an (sura *Fatiha*, The Opening), about which God said, "You can make your prayer with *Fatiha* alone."

Q: Before we turn to sura Fatiha, I'd like to ask you a question. We are speaking about tevhid from the perspective of Sufism. In doing so, we are also trying to give voice to our illuminated hearts. Earlier, you said that we must accept that different human dispositions have always existed. You said that this is what "fragrance" in the Prophet's saying refers to. So of course while it is clear that on the one hand we ought to respect all dispositions, on the other hand the issue of worship is a very contentious topic, particularly with respect to Sufism. Something the famous (late) oncologist Haluk Nurbaki (also a Sufi shaykh) said has stayed with me, and I'd like to ask you about it. Our Prophet said that prayer is the light of his eyes. And if he (the Prophet) is our guide and leader, do we have any right to renounce prayer, while knowing that it was the most beloved of forms of worship for him? Haluk Nurbaki says, "One wonders, was the Prophet less in love with God than those who claim that they are in love with God and renounce prayer? God forbid! He continued with his prayer for his entire life." I wonder what the purpose of love is here.

A: "Our direction (*kible*; Ar. *qibla*) is the Face of the Beloved, our prayer is continuous / Love is our imam, and the illuminated heart is our community."⁹⁷

In order for a person's prayer to be continuous, as mentioned in the couplet here, and for them to be firm with it, God says, "Even the Prophet is obliged to worship his Beloved with the body." Worship of outward form is the continuation of this

state. People of God have performed prayer in various forms. None of the knowers of God, whom I have been humbled to meet and know renounced prayer. On the contrary, the spiritually elevated people of the time increased their prayers. I know that the Prophet used to pray until the morning. My teacher Kenan Rifa'i would perform hundreds of units of prayer each night; he prayed so much that his prayers were as much as they would have been had he been praying since he was one year old. Prayer demonstrates that our connection with the Beloved is not only spiritual; it needs material form. The outer (*zahir*) is the same as the inner (*batin*).

Q: In order to realize the inner meaning of prayer, one has to perform the outer prayer. Is that right?

A: Ibn 'Arabi says, "God manifests through humans, but in order for God's manifestation to occur, humans must first cry out, 'I am a servant, I am a servant!'" This crying out is prayer. A spiritual master like Ibn 'Arabi – who explained the Unity of Existence and the manifestation of God in humans – considers prayer to be of utmost importance. We will discuss the specifics of prayer shortly, including the stages through which we pass and the stations that we reach during prayer. It is known that Mevlana Rumi, the king of love, used to pray until the morning. It has been reported he would prostrate for such long stretches of time that his beard would freeze and stick to the ground of the mosque (Konya is very cold, as you know). They had to use warm water to wash his beard and melt the ice. If these great friends of God never renounced prayer, then who are we to give it up! God Forbid! There is also the verse in the Qur'an in which God says, "I love those who are constant in prayer."⁹⁸

Some exegetes have interpreted this to mean the prayers of the heart. While this is true, God also loves stability and

commitment. What He does not love is inconsistency and actions that stem from the *nefis*. If this weren't the case, there might have been a verse in the Qur'an that would state, "Be constant in your prayers until your heart starts praying, and once your heart starts to pray then you can leave your prayers." Is there such a verse in the Qur'an? No. Let me share an anecdote. My mother is an *arif* (possessor of mystical knowledge). Once she met a self-professed Sufi shaykh who held her in high regard and showed her much affection. He said to her, "My daughter, why do you pray? When you pray, there is a separation between you and Him. That is, you worship God as if you were a separate entity from Him. And by doing so, you are practicing dualism." My mother's reply was extraordinary. She said: "You are quite right. But just now, during our conversation, I saw tears rolling down your cheeks. You are in love with God. There is a lover and a Beloved. There is you, and there is God. How can a person fall in love with himself? Why were you crying?" This is the secret. There is unity in duality. There is no unity without duality. Without multiplicity there is no unity.

The first verse of sura *Fatiha* is the *basmala*.⁹⁹ The letter "b" in "*Bismi'Llah al-rahman al-rahim*" is the manifestation of God's Names and Attributes in one single body. Which body? The body of the Prophet. "B" means body, and it is a dark, ambiguous letter. If we pass the stage of the letter "b," it is as was said to the Prophet in sura *al-Anfal* (Battle Gains), "When you threw, it wasn't you who threw, but God who threw."¹⁰⁰ If we are purified of our material existence, we become the dot under the letter "b."¹⁰¹ Becoming that esteemed dot is the station of 'Ali, who teaches us the meaning of the *basmala*. It is for this station that we give thanks and praise God in sura *Fatiha*. This station teaches us

and makes us reflect. God becomes one with His Prophet through His bestowal of compassion and manifestation of mercy. The manifestation of God's mercy is God's enabling us to have the conduct of the Prophet and to be protected by it. This protection feels like living in the next world while still living here.

"Alhamdu li-'Llahi rabb al-'alamin (All praise is for God, the Lord of the worlds)." One of the secrets of sura *Fatiha* is hidden in these three words. Declaring that all praise is for the Lord of the worlds starts with praise (*hamd*). That is, it is an implicit, heartfelt plea as if to say, "Teach me praise." There are two very important points in praise. Praise is a greater station than gratitude. It is to be content with whatever may come from God: trouble, trial, sorrow, all of it. It is like saying to God, "O my Beloved! I am happy with everything that comes from You!" But which name of God is addressed here? *Rabb* (Lord).

Q: Yes, God is addressed as the one who teaches and nurtures.

A: Because the word "praise" is from God to God, it is between the meaning of God and the attribute of Lordship, because praise is not a state we can achieve through our individual, carnal souls. For people to receive pain as pleasant and to not have it be painful is only possible with the manifestation of God in them. For example, taking a bitter medicine that will have a healing effect on your illness is a manifestation of Mercy (*al-Rahman*), but not feeling the bitterness and saying, "It is necessary for my healing" is a manifestation of Compassion (*al-Rahim*). The combination of both is praise. Therefore, this teaches us that praise occurs as something from yourself to you, and that this is possible only after prostrating before Adam, namely, the Perfected Human.

This prostration means to have the state of Perfected Humans who don't exist with their *nefis* and to adopt qualities like theirs.

Ibn 'Arabi, the Greatest Shaykh, teaches us, "When you are in the standing position during prayer, you earn the rewards of all the trees and walls of the earth, because their state is also that of prayer – this is the connection; when you bend forward, you earn the rewards of all four-legged animals, and when you prostrate, you earn the rewards of all crawling animals, plants and herbs. The meaning of their worship manifests in you, and you acquire all their rewards. Mind you, we gain all this during prayer." This is the attribute of Mercy. Everything worships, and everything is attracted to God. To comprehend the meaning of God, that is called witnessing.

Q: It is the attraction of a single dot, is it not?

A: In science, we call this affinity, or the power of attraction. In the entire macro and micro cosmos, there is the manifestation of mercy, love, and attraction. The affinity between iron and oxygen is an example of the manifestation of Mercy. The world – which constitutes movement – emerges from this attraction. Compassion manifests. Why? With Mercy there is love. God's protection for His creation is as capacious as the love that permeates the mother's womb. Compassion keeps the world and the entire universe under His protection. Those who praise and thank their Lord sense His protection. His Compassion is for those who give praise; it is a sublime attribute; it is comparable to our mother's bosom; it is, so to speak, the mother's bosom opened to us by God. Compassion is the bosom of love. In the phrase, "He is the most Beneficent, the most Merciful," God reminds us of these two truths that belong to Him and that have become

manifest in His Prophet. The *Fatiha* is a chapter of the Qur'an that is recited half by God and half by the servant. It is a chapter that is shared by God and the servant.

Q: This is quite extraordinary.

A: Yes. Next is “the Master of the Day of Judgment.” God is the Master of the Day of Judgment. What does that mean? It refers to the moment you rise to your feet and stand in the presence of God. The meaning of God becomes manifest in you in this standing position (*kiyam*; Ar. *qiyam*). God warns us not to attribute this to ourselves; He is its Master. This is a very important point. We will be called to account for our deeds. He will ask, “I gave you hands and feet. What did you sow? Did you cultivate your body? Did you find meaning? Did you uncover your treasure? I am the Master of that day.” What day is that day? It is the day when human beings will say, “I am nothing and He is everything.” God says, “That happens with My blessing alone.” Here He reminds us of His meaning. We now move to a very important point.

Q: The servant starts to speak?

A: Yes. If we pay close attention, we will see that *Şeriat*, *Tarikat* (Sufi path), and *Hakikat* (Truth) are hidden in these verses of the *Fatiha*. To be at the level of *Şeriat* is to say, “You alone do we worship,” which is to say, “There is me and there is You. I worship You with my *nefis*, thinking it's from me and attributing the power of worship to myself while asking for your help.” To be on the *Tariqa* or the path of Sufism is to say, “When left alone, I am nothing. I perform my servitude only with Your help.” The mere thought of this (nothingness) arrests perfected humans at the core of their being. Addressing His servants, God says, “O tongue! You say you are in My presence and seek my help, and claim to

worship Me. But the limbs that appointed you as their representative commit slander; they are heedless of Me. You are lying when you say, ‘You alone do I worship and from You alone do we seek help.’” Possessors of mystical knowledge tremble at the thought that their words will be thrown back at them with the rebuke, “You’re lying!” So they are very relieved if and when they manage to move on to the next verse: *ihdina al-sirat al-mustaqim* (guide us to the Straight Path).

According to Ibn ‘Arabi, the tongue is the translator and spokesperson for the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet, the abdomen, the heart, and all the rest of the body during prayer. It is for this reason that possessors of mystical knowledge regard this part of the prayer as the most dangerous. They say that at this stage of prayer, if a person is in the presence (of God) with his entire existence, and if that person directs himself to God with his entire being, just as the tongue says (You alone do I worship, and from You alone do we seek help), then prayer becomes spiritual ascent (*mirac*) for him. As for the straight path, the one who is already on the straight path takes over, and the task is made easier, and this is what *mirac* means: “Make my feet firm on Your Path.” This is the Truth. This path is not just any path. This is a straight and continuous path. In this world, for someone to be steadfast on the Straight Path, they have to embody the ethical conduct (*ahlak*) of their spiritual teacher and the Prophet. This is the straight path. Moreover, the people of knowledge consider being stable on the path “the greatest miracle.” To be firm-footed, not give up, and not say, “I haven’t been able to perfect my manner and make progress on the path. I quit, I can no longer follow the path.” To not throw away the sword of action – that is the Straight Path and its end, which is *tevhid*. That is why the Prophet’s Straight Path is *tevhid*. May

God allow us to achieve this.

The rest of the *Fatiha* is a heartfelt plea, “Lead us to the path of those whom You have favored and not of those who have incurred Your wrath nor of those who are astray.” The word “astray” in the original represents the station of Christianity, which refers to someone who is stuck in love and unable to reach unity, or to the idolizing of form and forsaking of knowledge. It also represents the station of Judaism, at which one dwells in knowledge, or gets stuck at knowledge without love; the term “*maghdubi ‘alayhim*” (those who have incurred Your wrath) represents the people of this station.

The verses recited after the *Fatiha* turn the inner meaning of the *Fatiha* into embodied experience. The worshipper moves into the bowing position. This gesture signals the shame one feels in responding to God’s question, “I created you naked and gave you intellect and understanding; what have you brought to Me?” Rumi phrased this question of God in the following way: “Where and why did you shed your tears? How did you spend your life? I granted you hands and feet so that you could sow from the soil of your body. What have you produced?” In response to this divine address, we pronounce three times, “*Subh’ana Rabbiyu’l-‘azim* (Praise be to the Mightiest Lord).” With the first pronunciation, we declare God to be above all human conceptions of God (*tenzih*); in the second pronunciation, we declare God to be above all the attributes with which He is associated (*teshbih*). With the third pronunciation, we affirm incomparability (*tenzih*) and similitude (*teshbih*). We declare both of these truths about Him. We say, “You are above all our ideas about You.” Does this mean we no longer imagine who God is? Of course we do; in fact “prayer” is our understanding of God, an understanding that corresponds to our own eyes and spiritual capacities. But it is proper to refrain from depicting

Him with a specific image. We should think of Him as infinite and eternal. This is just such a moment, that is, a moment of displaying etiquette (*edep*), because we are in the position of bowing (*rüku*).

The servant repeats this beautiful declaration while in the bowing position, and after affirming God's greatness and his own nothingness, God calls out to him, "Hold your head up and offer praise." Here, only those who have attained the truth of their prayer can say, "*Rabbana laka'l-hamd* (All praise is for You alone)." First he stands up, but having no strength left, he falls in prostration and asks to be granted God's mercy. While in prostration he says "*Subhana Rabbiyu'l-a'la* (Praise be to the elevated Lord)" three times. The first utterance means, "I declare my Lord to be above all the beauty of attributes." The meaning of *Tenzih*, or the state of affirming God's incomparability, takes on an altogether different dimension here. The second utterance means, "I declare my God to be above all the beauty that I am able to comprehend." The third utterance is to say, "I declare my God to be above all beauty that I might perceive." Whilst in prostration, the servant perceives his non-existence; God asks him, "O my servant, I have given you abundant blessings, where are the fruits of these blessings?" After the second prostration, he sit on his knees, and listens to this question. If he has reached his ascension during the prostrations (that is, if he has understood his nothingness), then he recites salutations to God (*ettahiyyatu*; Ar. *al-tahiyya*) with meaning. This is the moment about which the Prophet said, "There was nothing else between God and me."

What does the deliverance of salutations mean? It means to remember, mention, and extend thanks for the Prophet who allows us to understand all this, and for the experiences we are able to have through worship. There are three very

important sentences in the salutations. The first sentence is either said by the spirit or to the spirit, which is God's breath and command. The second sentence is addressed to the Prophet, which is the illuminated heart. The third sentence is said by our soul. This is the sentence that draws us back to the world. Prayer ends with the chapters in the Qur'an that the Prophet recited from time to time. Now we return to the world, and if we performed our prayer with beauty then we feel happy. In the *Mathnawi*, Mevlana says prayer is "Judgment day;" if the servants are unable to answer the questions put to them, they turn their heads to the right, seeking help from friends of God and from the prophets. If the servant is still in this world, the friends of God tell the servant, 'I can help you; I have accepted you; I have taken you to the Hereafter from your *mirac*. But in the next world, nothing and no one can help you except God.' The servant then turns his head to the left and seeks help from the things he worshipped in the world. Those things that he worshipped then say to him – if he is still in this world – 'We thank you for your loyalty to us, but as you know none of us can help you.' In the afterlife, they tell him, 'We cannot help you in any way. What good did you derive in the world from worshipping us?'"

The servant is now left alone with his God; he holds up his hands, opens his palms, and supplicates. We know that prostration is a way to subdue the *nefis* that establishes itself as a ruler over us. Prostration destroys the *nefis*. The *nefis* considers itself a sovereign; in the same way that a sovereign views all people in a society as his servants, so does the *nefis*, as though it were a god. Prostration also marks the servant's realization of his own nothingness, and his finding the perfect guide who is the manifestation of the Real King.

I want to mention two types of prostrations here, and I will

explain them further below. Let us return to the topic of Adam. Since Adam was honored with divine blessings, he possessed the essence of love. But in eating the forbidden apple of love, he erred. He felt great pain because of this mistake. Eventually, however, he became a dutiful servant. He recognized his nothingness and reached the station of prophethood. He attributed his error to himself, regarding it as a particular rather than an essential mistake and said to God, "The mistake was mine, your servant's." This admission earned him the rank of prophethood. God commanded Satan to prostrate before Adam. But Satan fell to drawing comparisons between him and Adam, and defiantly declared, "I was created of fire, and he of clay. Fire is superior to clay. So why should I prostrate to him?" This arrogance made Satan from among the rejected ones. Moreover, he tried to blame God and said, "I possess no power or will; it is You who does and makes us do anything. If You had so willed, You would have made me prostrate!"

Intellect alone is not enough to comprehend God's meaning and commands. Intellectual understanding must be accompanied with right conduct (*edep*). *Edep* means the ability to see God's meaning in all of God's creation. If *Şeriat* and Sufism don't go together, true meaning will not become manifest. Prayer represents the moment when a servant understands his limits. Like Satan, we too might be inclined to say, "Why do I need prayer? If You had so willed, You would have made me do it." "I love you very much; why do we need to get married? Let's continue our relationship as it is." Prayer is like a spiritual wedding. We understand our limits during prayer and say, "we are servants." This is one of the most beautiful meanings of prayer. God commanded all the angels to prostrate before Adam, the master of the moment. That was the first prostration to be performed after

God commanded prostration. All the angels prostrated before Adam without the slightest hesitation. This is the meaning of the first prostration. They then looked up, saw the light on Adam's face, and prostrated again. This was the second prostration, the prostration of the mystical state (*hal*). The first prostration was that of *Şeriat*, the second of Divine Reality. Some of the spirits however, did not respond to the command of the first prostration. Even so, they saw the light on Adam's face and made the second prostration. They first denied God's *Şeriat* and resisted submitting. A second group made the first prostration but stopped there, and in doing so settled for *Şeriat*. Thus they fulfilled the command externally but didn't understand its meaning. Hence they did not perform the second prostration since they could not see the light on Adam's face. This manner of praying does not lead a person to the station of witnessing. A third group made both prostrations. They are the knowers, friends, and prophets of God. How fortunate they are. May God allow us to be with them at all times. Prostration during prayer reminds us of the joyous moment in pre-eternity when we cried, "Yes, we bear witness!" to the question "Am I not your Lord?" Prayer brings together unity of God, reminder of God's existence, prostration to God, and the secret of the proclamation, "We bear witness" from pre-eternity.

Q: We experience the state we were once in when we said, "Yes, we bear witness" in pre-eternity. When you spoke about the importance of prostration earlier, you said that we are not alone when we pray, that the trees and even the walls around us pray with us. Isn't prostration the most critical element of every society? Historically, Muslims have always prostrated before God; but then even pagans have made similar gestures before their idols. For this reason, the first rule of prostration is to say

“I have submitted,” in other words, to be Ishmael for our prayer and for our life. Of course you know this better, that prostration is not limited to human beings. God says in sura al-Nahl (the Bee), “Do the [disbelievers] not observe the things that God has created, casting their shadows right and left, submitting themselves to God obediently?”¹⁰² In addition to the angels, all living things in the heavens and the earth also prostrate themselves before God. They are not arrogant about any good deed that they do. To go back to the meaning of prostration, just as we work on our nefis and sacrifice our desires during prayer, do we not destroy arrogance – one of the seven deadly sins – during prostration?

A: I heard a talk by an artist the other day. He said, “I pray in order to express my nothingness before God and to be able to prostrate.” I liked his answer very much. What a wonderful thought. This is prostration. When I was studying what it means to prostrate the self, I remember coming across the saying of a gnostic who said, “those who deliberately renounce prayer unknowingly reduce themselves in the eyes of God to a level lower than that of those who prostrate before an idol, even though they are not Muslims.”

Q: Our day begins and ends with prayer. It strikes me as particularly interesting that our religious festivities also begin with prayer; for instance, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The meaning of these days has a deeper significance with prayer, which is itself a celebration for those who reflect. Can we discuss this further? Why do we pray during religious festivities?

A: Prayers performed on such special days are about love and gratitude. It is to say, “I have fulfilled the duty that was due on me from Your blessing, and I now declare my love for

You with this prayer.” During spiritual sermons such as at the time of Eid prayers and other religious gatherings, the fire of love passes from person to person. Let me relate a *hadith* of the Prophet to illustrate this point. The Prophet said: “Shake hands without gloves.” I have learnt that love and knowledge are transmitted from the veins of the palm of one’s hand to the heart. So when you shake hands with someone from among the people of love, if you are sincere and have the right intention, then it is God’s love that is transmitted to you from that single handshake. Let me recount another *hadith* of the Prophet: “Make your rows during congregational prayer as close together as possible.” This means that the pleasure of worship and the meaning inherent in worship travels from one worshipper to another. It can also mean that we taste spiritual pleasure together by praying slowly and behind an Imam. For this reason, it is very important that we welcome religious festivities and all other spiritually uplifting events with prayer.

Before we conclude our talk on prayer, I’d like to add that the Perfected Human says, “The Prophet made a request that divine peace and blessings be upon his people (the same request we recite in our salutations). As a result of this request of the Prophet, if the prayer of a servant is performed with its inner meaning, then he is taken to the stations of the content self (*raziye*; Ar. *radiyya*) and the self-pleasing to God (*merdiye*; Ar. *mardiyya*).” What are these two stations? *Radiyya* is when we are content with God and grateful for all that He gives. In return, if God wills, He will make us pleasing to Himself. Then God speaks to us, as in the Qur’anic verse, “Return to your Lord well-pleased, and well-pleasing to Him.”¹⁰³ The servant continues to struggle – remember that work is also prayer. Understanding this point is essential. The servant reaches the highest station, well-

pleased and well-pleasing to Him. If, with God's blessing, he reaches the station of Unity of Actions (*fi'il tevhidi*), all his deeds and words belong to God and he sees all of creation through the attributes of the Truth. He continues his efforts unceasingly, reaches the station of Attributes, and if he perseveres on this path, the Essence is unveiled to Him. Here, he hears the divine address, "O My Servant! I am pleased with you, are you pleased with Me too?" On hearing this, he perseveres even more. This is the meaning of prayer.

Q: I recently picked up Osman Kemali Effendi's collection of poems.[104](#) On opening the book, I opened to page one hundred and twenty four, where the following couplet spoke to me:

***"O ascetic! If you seek God, the heart is His evidence
It is the abode of the All-Merciful; seek and find God
therein."***

A: 'Ali said, "I don't worship a God whom I cannot see." The ability to see God is realized during prayer. Mevlana Rumi said, "Prayer is a light in one's heart. Those who wish can illuminate themselves with it. The key that opens the door of paradise is prayer. It is the pillar of religion; whoever renounces it renounces their religion and faith as well. Whoever establishes it establishes their religion and goes to the next world as a believer." In sura *al-Mu'minun* (Believers) it mentions, "those who pray humbly," (being overwhelmed by the awe and majesty of God) and "those who are ever mindful guardians of their Prayers."[105](#) And as you know, the Prophet gave the good news, "I will intercede for those who pray." There can be no greater news than this.

When asked to comment on prayer, the Prophet said, "If there was a river flowing outside your door, and you bathed in it five times a day, would any dirt be left on your body?"

His companions answered, “No, there would be no dirt left, O Messenger of God.” “So, the five prayers are similar to this. God forgives your sins with prayer.” The time of each prayer is also very important, as people are being invited to God. The morning prayer is when people are given physical and spiritual abilities. A person must be awake at that time to be able to give thanks, as if to say, “I am able to wake up, I have been given the faith and power to worship You. You have given me physical ability as well as granted me with spiritual ability.” A person gets up and is united with His Beloved. This is a very joyful moment.

The morning prayer, which is probably the most important of all prayers, is also a way to express gratitude for the manifestation of the Prophet, which took place during a time of immense tribulation. It is also to give thanks for the moment when one is taken out from darkness and heedlessness to (a life of) meaning. Do you see what kinds of things we are reminded of by the morning prayer? It is as if at that time, the angel Michael (Mika'il) distributes our entire spiritual blessing to us. Speaking about the outer benefits of prayer, Bernard Shaw, the famous British author, considered prayer as a prescription for the twenty-first century. It is the sustenance that prepares a person for the rest of the day. The blessing and nourishment of each day comes from the morning prayer.

The noon prayer is a reminder that jolts us when we are pre-occupied with our work. It says, “Stop, O traveler! Where are you going? Will all this work that you immerse yourself in take you anywhere? To work as a service to humanity is fine, but how sad if the only aim is to benefit yourself!”

The Qur'an says the afternoon prayer is the middle prayer and is very important; afternoon is when people are distracted. If you're tired you will be given strength; at that

moment, there is a God Who reminds you of Himself.

Then comes the evening (dusk) prayer. It will get dark and the hardships will begin. A short evening prayer prepares us for these challenges and prevents us from being forgetful.

Finally with the night prayer we complete the day with a supplication like, “Even as I am preparing to go to bed, keep me with You. Acquaint my spirit with the meaning of the pre-eternal realm.” The five daily prayers keep this regime going. But what should we be most attentive to while praying? Let me quote one of Mevlana Rumi’s heartfelt pleas to God; it is from the second volume of the *Mathnawi*:

My God! If I don’t offer my heart to you completely, then I don’t consider this prayer to be prayer. It is because of your love that I turned my face to the direction of prayer. Without you, what would I do with prayer and the *kible*, which otherwise only make me weary? O God, I feel ashamed at my prayer that is full of hypocrisy. Shame prevents me from entering my heart; I cannot find you. Truthfully, the one who performs his prayer in its true meaning must have the attributes of an angel, but I am still a monster. If a person’s clothes touch a dog, they cannot pray unless the clothes are cleaned. But here I carry the dog of my soul in my arms. Please accept my prayer. Through prayer I strive to find you in my heart and to be with you, so that I can then stop speaking of the pain of separation. How can I call this prayer when while my face is turned towards the prayer niche (*mihrab*), my heart is in the bazar?

This is the kind of prayer that the people of knowledge recommend to us. A man once entered a mosque. He saw the sultan praying inside and said, “greetings to my sultan!” This angered the sultan very much, and on completing his prayer, he shouted, “Don’t you know that you cannot greet someone

in the middle of their prayer! You forgetful one!” The man, who was a gnostic, replied, “If you had actually been in the middle of prayer, I would not have greeted you. But while praying, you were wondering what color you should paint the walls of your palace. My aim was to bring you back to your prayer by greeting you.” Prayer is where humans most frequently run into Satan. It is the time for a person to be alone with him or herself; it is when a person is most aware of his status as a servant, of his nothingness, of his shortcomings. One day, Satan was waiting outside the mosque. A person who was about to enter the mosque recognized him and asked, “O Satan, what are you doing here?” “I’m planning to deceive that man who is praying. But the problem is that I can’t enter the mosque!” “Why?” the man asked, and Satan replied, “There is a gnostic taking a nap over there and I am very afraid of him!” If we are able to pray in the same way as that sleeping gnostic, then prayer enables us to reach his state. For many years, Hanafi performed the morning prayer with the same ablution that he had done for his night prayer. Even in his sleep he enjoyed the unity and togetherness with God.

Ibn ‘Arabi says, “Performing prayer in its outer form earns a person a spiritual station in this world. But performing prayer with meaning brings nearness and allows the person to reach the degree of Mustafa.” It is the blessing of this intimacy that matters the most. I am often asked about its meaning, and I usually explain it through my experience as a teacher. A teacher, out of pity, passes a student who regularly does his homework but doesn’t fully understand the material. The point is that even if we can’t perform prayer in an ideal state and do not comprehend the meaning of prayer at each moment, we should still perform it in its outer form so that on the Day of Judgment we can find the strength to say to God,

“Even as I was not able to attain its meaning, I did my homework. As a teacher, I took pity on the students who didn’t complete their assignments and passed them. O Lord, please do the same with me.” Prayer is a form of worship, the meaning of which multiplies when we talk about it. This is what we have been discussing. May God forgive me for my shortcomings and may He make my prayer a spiritual state for me and make the prayers of all Muslims a spiritual state for them. I’d like to add one last thing: Istanbul is a sublime city that unites two directions of prayer. That is, when you face the Ka’ba from Istanbul, you also face Masjid al- Aqsa. It is only Istanbul’s unique privilege that it unites these two at the same time. May God allow us to understand this.

Q: While praying, we turn towards the Ka’ba. Wherever we may be in the world, we have only one direction. Can you say more about this as we conclude?

A: Turning one’s face towards the Ka’ba is one of the conditions of prayer. But this gesture also has inner meanings. While some may find this reading puzzling, in truth, we are prostrating to each other’s illuminated hearts. Turning towards the Ka’ba ensures praying in congregation; that is what makes it important. With regards to its inner meaning, it is said in sura *al-Baqara* (The Cow), “Take care to do your prayers, praying in the best way, and stand before God in devotion.”¹⁰⁶ The continuous prayer is the prayer of the illuminated heart, and its direction is the heart of the Prophet– that is, the one who has taught us its meaning. What this means is this: just as you turn towards the Ka’ba when you pray, you also prostrate yourself before the Prophet or the spiritual teacher who taught you the teachings of the Prophet. Prostration here signifies paying one’s debt of loyalty. Prostrate before the spiritual teacher who reflects the

meaning of God in the present so you may remember God's command to Adam to prostrate. Please don't misunderstand what I just said; it is not that we prostrate ourselves before human beings, but rather before the meaning of humans such as the Prophet and spiritual teacher. Prostrating before a human being is idolatry, God forbid! What we prostrate to is the meaning, the meaning of that lion which becomes manifest in the tiniest of bodies; it is to that meaning that we prostrate. If you're prostrating to that meaning, then do it. But if not, and you see the object of prostration as a human being, then don't prostrate, or else you will be led to disbelief. The goal of prostrating to Adam is not to bow before him. Rather it is to cultivate faith in what he says, to do as he tells us to do, and to avoid what he tells us to avoid.

[90](#) Refers to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, which states, "Prayer is the ascension of the believer."

[91](#) Qur'an, *al-Baqara* (The Cow), (2:34).

[92](#) The names Ahmad, Mahmud and Mustafa are all epithets of the Prophet Muhammad.

[93](#) *Khalil* or "Friend (of God)" is another title or name for Abraham.

[94](#) See Glossary.

[95](#) Ken'an Rifa'i, "Kemal Nefis Sayesinde Bulunur, (Perfection is reached through the nefis)," *Ilahiyat-ı Ken'an*, ed. Yusuf Ömürlü and Dinçer Dalkılıç, (Istanbul, 1988), p.68-69.

[96](#) In the Muslim tradition it is Ishmael that is said to have been sacrificed by Abraham because he was the first-born son.

[97](#) Yunus Emre, *Divan-i Ilahiyat*, Ed. Mustafa Tatcı, (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2012).

[98](#) Qur'an, *al-Baqara* (the Cow), (2:238).

[99](#) See "*Fatiha*" in the glossary for a complete translation of this Qur'anic chapter.

[100](#) Qur'an, *al-Anfal* (Battle Gains), (8:17).

[101](#) The letter "b" in the Arabic script is transcribed as: "ب"

[102](#) Qur'an, *al-Nahl* (the Bee), (16:48). Tr. Haleem, Qur'an, p. 169.

[103](#) Sura *al-Fajr* (Daybreak), (89:28).

[104](#) Osman Kemali Efendi, *Kemali Divanı'ndan Aşk Sızıntıları*, Ed. Baha Doğramacı, (Istanbul: Divan Matbaacılık, 1977).

[105](#) Qur'an, *al-Mu'minun* (Believers), (23:2) and (23:9).

[106](#) Qur'an, *al-Baqara* (the Cow), (2:238). Tr. Haleem, Qur'an, p. 27.