

Chapter 7

The Method

‘Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth and the Sight wherewith he seeth and the Hand whereby he graspeth and the Foot whereon he walketh.’¹

The whole of Sufism—its aspirations, its practice, and in a sense also even its doctrine—is summed up in this Holy Tradition, which is quoted by the Sufis perhaps more often than any other text apart from the Qur’ān. As may be inferred from it, their practices are of two kinds: rites which are binding on all Muslims, and additional voluntary rites. When a novice enters an order, one of the first things he or she has to do is to acquire an extra dimension which will confer a depth and a height on rites which (assuming an Islamic upbringing) have been performed more or less exoterically since childhood. The obligations of Islam, often known as ‘the five pillars’, are the *Shahādah*, the ritual prayer five times a day, the almsgiving, the fast of the month of *Ramaḍān*, and the pilgrimage to Mecca if circumstances allow, this last obligation being the only one that is conditional.

We have already seen the difference between the *Shahādah* as fathomed by the Sufis and its superficial meaning ‘none is

¹Bukhārī, Rīqaq, 37

worshipable but God'. But this objective difference involves a corresponding subjective difference, for there arises the question: Who is it that can bear witness that there is no god but God, no reality but the Reality? And for the Sufis the answer to this question lies in the Divine Name *ash-Shahīd* (the witness) which, significantly enough, comes next to *al-Haqq* (the Truth, the Reality) in the most often recited litany of the Names. If God alone *is*, no testimony can be valid except His. It is hypocrisy to affirm the Oneness of Being from a point of view which is itself in contradiction with the truth, and it was no doubt to galvanise his disciples into awareness of this that Ḥallāj uttered his devastating paradox: 'Whoso testifyeth that God is One thereby setteth up another beside Him (namely his own individual self as testifier)'.²

The Witness must be, not the self, but the Self, which means that the soul is not competent to voice the Shahādah. All the Sufi Orders are in agreement about this, though they may differ in their methods of bridging the gap between hypocrisy and sincerity. In some orders, by contrast with the single recitation which is legally sufficient, the novice is made to recite the Shahādah hundreds of thousands of times in order that he learn to bring it out from a deeper point of consciousness; and even then, although he is allowed doctrinal knowledge of the Oneness of Being, he will not be allowed to meditate on that doctrine if he is judged to be intellectually too dormant.

So far only the first part of the Shahādah has been considered. But this first Pillar of Islam is two-fold. The testifier must testify also that Muḥammad is the Messenger of God—*Muḥammadun Rasūlu 'Llāh*. The 'traveller' must learn to see in this also an epitome of the spiritual path, of the wave that can take him to the end of his journey. Both testifications end alike. But whereas *lā ilāha illā 'Llāh* begins with a negative, which signifies the turning of one's back on the world,

²*Akhhār al-Ḥallāj*, no. 49

*Muhammadun Rasūlu 'Llāh*³ begins with the state of human perfection as starting point for the realisation of all that lies beyond. In other words, there is a chasm between this formula and the novice, who is not allowed in some orders to repeat it methodically until the repetition of the first Shahādah has loosened certain constrictions in his soul and brought him to a point of being able to bridge the gap in aspiration and place his subjectivity in the name *Muḥammad*. The repetition of *Muḥammadun Rasūlu 'Llāh* with emphasis on the first word is like the donning of a splendid robe which is far too large but which has the magic power of making its wearer grow out to its dimensions. Meantime the wearer must scarcely admit to himself that he does not fill it; and it is an important part of the spiritual courtesy (*adab*) of the path that he should also see his fellow disciples as wearers of the same robe and reverence them accordingly. This is another instance of *ka'anna* (as if) which is so characteristic of Sufism, and another example of the primordially of its perspective. The second *Shahādah* can be taken, methodically, as a refusal to admit that the fall of man has ever taken place.⁴ But this point of view needs to be combined with an acute consciousness of the results of the fall, that is of one's own shortcomings and if need be those of others, a consciousness which finds its expression in the first two words of the first *Shahādah*, *lā ilāha*, or simply in the negative first word. The two-fold initial Pillar of Islam can thus be taken as a combination of the standpoints of fallen and un-fallen man, and the Sufi must always be ready to move from one to the other and back again.

The second Pillar of Islam—to give one more illustration of the difference between the legal and mystical conception of worship—is the ritual prayer together with the ablution

³If *Muhammadun Rasūlu 'Llāh* expresses the ebb of the wave, the corresponding expression of its flow is to be found in the three letters *Alif-Lām-Mim*—see above p. 26, note 2.

⁴So also can the first *Shahādah*, needless to say, in its highest sense.

which is an inseparable part of it. All believers would agree that a rite is a symbolic act and that the ablution symbolises the purification of the soul. But it would no doubt be true to say that the generality of believers look on the ablution simply as a rite which confers a degree of purity judged by Heaven to be sufficient for the performance of the prayer—whence the consciousness of being in a state of legal or ritual purity, a consciousness which must not be underestimated for it is by definition a ‘state of grace’ and therefore open to all manner of blessings. The Sufi necessarily shares this point of view and this consciousness; but beyond this legal state he is concerned with actual purity which he can ‘taste’ and which has to be made total and permanent; and for him this ablution is above all a means of extending the purity that has already been achieved and of intensifying his consciousness of it with the help of the transparent and luminous element.

The secret identity between the linguistic root from which *ṣūfi* comes and another root which has the basic meaning of ‘pure’ has already been mentioned; and there can be little doubt that the term *ṣūfi* came to be accepted and established largely because it conjures up the word *ṣāfi* (pure), thus pointing to a quality which is the beginning and end of all mysticism. In fact Bishr al-Hāfi,⁵ one of the great early Sufis of Baghdad, said expressly in explaining this term: ‘The Sufi is he who keeps his Heart pure (*ṣāfi*).’ It must be remembered moreover that not only the ritual act but also the element itself is a symbol, which means that it is linked to a chain of archetypes going back to its Divine Origin. In other words, the water must be considered as flowing into this finite world from the next; and according to the Qur’ān, water is one of the symbols of Mercy (which includes purification), and of Life.⁶ The quantity used does not enter into the question.

⁵d. 842.

⁶See the author’s *Symbol & Archetype* (Quinta Essentia, 1997), ch. 7.

A drop of water as well as a lake symbolises the Infinite Beatitude into which Mercy reintegrates; and the water used in the ablution, when consecrated by the aspiration to return, is above all a vehicle of reintegration or, from another angle, of liberation, for water is likewise a symbol of the Living Substance of Reality set free from the ice of finite forms.

The same End, looked at from a different point of view, is 'enacted' in the ritual prayer in which each cycle of movements leads to a prostration followed by a sitting posture. The Sufis interpret these in the light of the Quranic verse *Everyone therein (in the worlds of creation) passeth away; and there remaineth the Face of thy Lord in Its Majesty and Bounty.*⁷ The passing away corresponds to the prostration, and the remaining to the seatedness which is the most compact and stable posture of the whole prayer.⁸ From this verse are derived two basic Sufi terms *fanā'* (extinction) and *baqā'* (remaining, subsistence, Eternality); it is not as himself but as the Self that one who has been extinguished can be said to subsist.

Of the voluntary rites of Islam as performed by the Sufis, the invocation of the Name *Allāh* has already been mentioned as by far the most important. There might seem to be a certain contradiction between the opening of the Holy Tradition quoted at the outset of this chapter which sets the obligatory above the voluntary and the Quranic affirmation that *dhikr Allāh*, which is voluntary, is *greater* even than the ritual prayer, which is obligatory. But it must be remembered that although what is obligatory serves to confer a spiritual rhythm on the flow of the hours, the time that it actually takes is relatively short. The voluntary has therefore a potential precedence over it by being capable of embracing and penetrating the whole of life, and this is what those who practise methodically the

⁷LV: 26-7.

⁸For a fuller treatment of the significance of these movements, see *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 187-90.

invocation aim at making it do. The meaning of the Holy Tradition is clearly that what is a legal obligation cannot be replaced, at the whim of an individual, by something which is not. Thus the Sufis are in agreement that the invocation of the Name, in itself the most powerful of all rites, is only acceptable to God on the basis of the invoker's having performed what is obligatory. It could not be a legal obligation itself for power necessarily means danger; and by no means every novice is allowed to proceed at once to the invocation of the Supreme Name.

The recitation of the Qur'ān is no doubt the voluntary rite which is most widely spread throughout the Islamic community as a whole. The Sufis may be said to differ from the majority in that when they recite it—or when they listen to it which is ritually equivalent—they do so as a prolongation of *dhikr Allāh*, with no abatement of their aspiration to return to God. The doctrine of the Uncreatedness of the Revealed Book holds out a means of union which is not to be refused. Moreover the soul has need of the Qur'ān as a complement to the Name, being as it is by its very nature what might be called a multiple unity, and its God-given multiplicity demands a certain direct recognition which it is not the Name's function to accord. The following passage will find an echo in every reader of the Qur'ān. But it concerns the Sufis above all, for they alone are fully conscious of the problem it touches on:

‘The Quran is, like the world, at the same time one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, sentences, pictures and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of divine “cunning”. The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without

resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed—even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue that it accepts this tendency while at the same time reversing the movement thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.⁹

The Name and the Book are two poles between which lie a wealth of possibilities of invocation and litany, some being nearer to one pole and some to the other. The recitation of the two Shahādahs, for example and the invocation of the two Names of Mercy are nearer to the Supreme Name, whereas certain long and complex litanies are more comparable to the Qur'an and as often as not they largely consist of extracts from it. But the Name may be said to have another complement which is very different from the Revealed Book though parallel to it in the sense that it directly recognises the diffuse nature of the soul, and this is the individual prayer when the suppliant speaks directly to the Divinity as to another person, telling him of his difficulties and his needs, for himself and for those near to him, both living and dead, and asking for favours of various kinds—or not, as the case may be, for it is essential that this prayer should be a spontaneous laying bare of the individual, and no two individuals are alike.

In this connection it must be remembered that night is the symbol of the soul, and that even the unclouded shining of the full moon does not change night into day. Whatever faith the soul may be said to possess can only be very relative as compared with the certainty of the Heart, but it can be more or less a prolongation of that certainty. There is a significant passage in the Qur'an where Abraham asks God to show him how He brings the dead to life. *Hast thou not*

⁹Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (World Wisdom Books, 1998), p. 48.

faith? is the divine rejoinder. *Yes, but (show me) so that my heart may be at rest*¹⁰ is his answer. These last words could be glossed: So that the certainty in the depth of my being may be left in peace, untroubled by the surface waves of reason and imagination. The answer is accepted and followed by a miracle of vivification, which proves that the soul has a right to certain concessions. It could in fact be said that the purpose of a miracle is to enable the whole soul to partake supernaturally of an 'absolute' certainty which is normally the prerogative of the Heart; but a small part of this effect can be produced through that most natural and human means, the individual prayer—not by any superimposition of faith but by the elimination of obstacles and distractions. This prayer, like the recitation of the Qur'ān, is shared by the whole community and is generally considered as an adjunct to the ritual prayer, which it normally follows, preceded by the words of the Qur'ān: *Your Lord hath said: Call upon Me and I will answer you.*¹¹ But the majority are not concerned with method, whereas the Sufi Shaykhs insist on this prayer above all for its methodic value, not only as a means of regular communion for the soul but also as a means for it to unburden itself, that is, to unload some of its inevitable cares and anxieties so that it may be, at any rate in its higher reaches, a prolongation of the peace of the Heart rather than a discontinuity. Nor should the gestural value of this prayer be underrated, for the suppliant, head slightly bowed and hands held out with hollowed empty palms upturned, becomes a soul-penetrating incarnation of spiritual poverty.

It may be concluded from what is taught about human perfection—and this has already been touched on in relation to the Messenger—that the primordial soul is a unified multiple harmony suspended as it were between the next world and this world, that is, between the Inward and the Outward, in

¹⁰II: 260.

¹¹XL: 60.

such a way that there is a perfect balance between the pull of the inward signs—the Heart and beyond it the Spirit—and the *signs on the horizons*. This balance has moreover a dynamic aspect in that the Heart sends out through the soul a ray of recognition of the outer signs, the great phenomena of nature; and these by the impact they make on the senses, give rise to a vibration which traverses the soul in an inward direction, so that with man, the last created being, the outward movement of creation is reversed and everything flows back as it were through his Heart to its Eternal and Infinite Source. But in the fallen soul, where the attraction of the Heart is more or less imperceptible, the balance is broken and the scales are heavily weighted in favour of the outer world.

To ask how the true balance can be restored is one way of asking ‘What is Sufism?’ And the first part of the answer is that the Divine Name must take the place of the veiled Heart, and a movement towards it must be set up in the soul to counteract the pull of the outer world so that the lost harmony can be regained.

The mention of this most essential aspect of Sufism brings us to a consideration of the two terms, *qabd* (contraction) and *bast* (expansion) which occur so frequently in the Sufi treatises. The initial effort to establish the Name as centre of consciousness and to set up a movement towards it is one of *qabd*; and something of this contraction must be retained in the sense that it must still be there to control its concordant reaction of *bast*, not so as to diminish its amplitude but on the contrary to rescue it from being a return to the limitations of mundanity. The growth of the soul to primordial stature is none other than an aspect of this spiritual expansion as the complement of spiritual contraction. The Qur’ān continually makes a connection between the *qabd* of sacrifice and the *bast* of growth. It is worth noting also that in Arabic the word for promoting growth (*tazkiyah*) has also the meaning of purification, which can scarcely be brought out in translation,

though the two ideas are nonetheless intimately connected, for impurity impedes growth; it is because the channels to and from the Heart are blocked that the fallen soul is stunted, at least in some of its elements. The symbolism of pruning, which is also a means of purification, is particularly illustrative of the principle in question, for pruning, like a *qabd* of the soul, is a diminishment with a view to an increase which will go far beyond what was there before the sacrifice. *Who will lend unto God a goodly loan that He may double it for him and add thereunto a bountiful reward?*¹² Such texts are basic in all religions.

An obvious example of *qabd* is fasting, but it must be remembered that the Islamic fast is broken at sunset. The month of Ramaḍān, together with the voluntary fasts which are an extension of it, is thus assimilated by the Sufis into the general alternation to which their method subjects them, the days of the month being an aspect of their *qabd* just as the nights are an aspect of their *bast*.

It is always possible—and this is the highest aim of *qabd*—that the concordant *bast* will be towards the Heart and beyond it. Nor is this higher possibility, which is a pure grace, precluded by the relatively outward *bast* which is all that the soul can command but which is itself a symbol of the inward expansion and therefore a potential instrument of releasing it. The two together constitute the balance of the primordial soul in which *qabd* is as it were replaced by the transcendent *bast*.

Of all the means at the disposal of the Sufis, it is the spiritual retreat, *khalwah* (literally ‘solitude’) which constitutes the most rigorous *qabd*. This is a prolonged contraction which refuses any expansion other than the grace of a transcendent one. After the example of the Prophet, some orders maintain that the retreat should be made in natural surroundings. In other orders it is made under the supervision of a Shaykh in a room set aside for that purpose.

¹²Qur’an LVII: 11.

The term *jalwah*¹³ is used collectively to express ‘expansive’ practices which are a complement to *khalwah* and the most obvious example of *jalwah* is to be found in the sessions of remembrance (*majālis adh-dhikr*), more or less regular meetings at which the brethren of the order meet to chant litanies and invoke the Divine Name together. In many orders a sacred dance is performed at these meetings, often as a prelude to a session of silent invocation. The most celebrated of these dances is the one given by Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī (d. 1273) to his order, the *Mawlawī* (in Turkish Mevlevi) *ṭarīqah*, whose members are thus better known to Westerners as ‘the whirling dervishes’, ‘les derviches tourneurs’, or some other equivalent. This dance, which constitutes a most ample *baṣṭ*, begins nonetheless with the initial *qabḍ* of a stately procession for which the dancer crosses his arms over his breast and clasps his shoulders. A singer chants, to the accompaniment of flutes and drums and sometimes of other instruments. Then at a given moment the Shaykh takes up his position for the folded-up figures to file solemnly past him; and each dancer, as he enters the orbit of the Shaykh’s presence, begins to unfold his arms and turn his body round, slowly at first but soon more quickly with his arms now stretched out on either side to their full extent, the right palm upwards as receptacle of Heaven and the left palm downwards to transmit Heaven to earth, and so the whirling continues.

This summary account fails to do justice to the complexity of the dance, but it serves to bring out one essential feature which it has in common with the dances of other orders, namely that the body stands for the Axis of the Universe which is none other than the Tree of Life. The dance is thus a rite of centralisation, a foretaste of the lost Centre and therefore of a lost dimension of depth and of height. It is thereby the equivalent of the Name which also, as we have

¹³More correctly *jilwah* literally ‘unveiling’ (of a bride), but the vowel change is deliberate to make a phonetic complement to its opposite.

seen, replaces the centre, and in fact the invocation of the Name, aloud or in silence, usually accompanies the dance which in any case is intended above all to plunge the dancer into a state of concentration upon Allāh.

Instead of 'usually' it would have been no exaggeration to say 'always', for even if the dancer has not consciously the Name *Allāh* on his tongue, he has another Name of the Essence in his breath, and that is *Hwwa* (He) which, as the Sufis know, transforms the very act of life into a perpetual invocation. In the Darqāwī order, a Moroccan branch of the great Shādhilī order, the dance is rigorously reduced to the two essential elements, verticality (implying centrality) and breath, everything else being eliminated and these two being stressed by a rhythmic up and down movement of the body together with a rhythmic rise and fall of the breast as the lungs are filled and emptied.

In connection with the regaining of the transcendent dimension which is the immediate consequence of regaining the Centre, and which is symbolised dynamically by these movements and statically, as in other dances, by the axial significance of the body, it may be mentioned that the mysterious identity between the dance and the Name is confirmed by the verse of the Qur'ān; *A good word is as a good tree; its root is firm, its branches are in heaven.*¹⁴ This may be interpreted: an invocation, and above all the Supreme Name which is the best of good words, is not a flat utterance which spreads horizontally outwards in this world to be lost in thin air, but a vertical continuity of repercussions throughout all the states of being. It is this most essential aspect of *dhikr Allāh* which is symbolised by the sacred dance.

Not every order has its dance, but litany is always a characteristic feature of the sessions of remembrance; and in connection with *qabd* and *bast* it is important to mention a threefold litany which is of such basic importance that it

¹⁴XIV: 24.

is regularly recited in most of the orders, varying from one to another only in certain unessential details. The first of its three formulae—they are usually repeated a hundred times—is ‘I ask forgiveness of God’ to which is added, at its final utterance ‘The Infinite—there is no God but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent, and to Him I turn in repentance’;¹⁵ and in this connection we may quote a saying of a great Sufi of Egypt, Dhū’n Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 861): The repentance of the generality is from sins, whereas repentance of the elect is from distraction (*ghaflah*).¹⁶ This last word could also be translated ‘scattered negligence’ which is precisely a mode of the profane expansion to which the *qabd* of repentance is, for the Sufi, an antidote. As a complement to this turning away from the world in the direction of the Heart, the second formula of the litany is the already mentioned invocation of blessings on the Prophet, which is virtually an extremity of *bast*. In these two formulae together, recited successively twice a day, there lies a powerful discipline of consecration. It is not so difficult to turn one’s back on the world for a phase of *qabd*—or rather, let it be said that the fact of belonging to a Sufi order means, or should mean, that the difficulty has in a sense been overcome: but it can be very difficult at first to prevent the subsequent relaxation from being no more than a relapse. The invocation of blessings on the Prophet offers the soul a means of expansion and therefore a virtual relaxation which precludes mundanity. Needless to say, it has to become spontaneous and sincere in order to be an operative *bast*. The resistance of the soul in this respect, according to how much of it retains a nostalgia for its former habits, is often surprising to the novice and always instructive. It is the

¹⁵As regards these last four words—one word in Arabic—it is worth mentioning that repentance, in the Islamic conception of it, is essentially a turning towards God, an image of His turning towards man. In English we normally say that God relents and man repents, but in Arabic exactly the same word is used for both turnings.

¹⁶Qushayrī, *Risālah*.

state of expansion not that of contraction which is the gauge of spiritual maturity, for no virtue can be said to have been definitely acquired if it recedes when *qabd* recedes, nor has a fault been eradicated if it reappears when the pressure of *qabd*. has been taken off. But more precisely, since *bast* has two aspects which the Sufis term drunkenness¹⁷ (*sukr*) and sobriety (*sahw*), it is the more prevalent state, namely sobriety, which is the true criterion of what has been spiritually achieved. It is to be expected that the soul will be in what might be called a state of sober *bast* for by far the greater part of each day.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it is normal that the grace of drunkenness should leave each time its mark, and in fact some Shaykhs describe the Supreme Station as the state of being inwardly drunk and outwardly sober.¹⁹

The third and last formula of the litany takes *qabd* and *bast* back to their transcendent archetypes which are respectively *fanā*²⁰ (extinction) and *baqā*' (subsistence). The first part, 'There is no god but God, Alone, no sharer', is an extinction.

¹⁷Owing to the frequent mention of wine in Sufi poetry, it is perhaps worth mentioning here that the only wine that the Sufis allow themselves is that which the Qur'an allows, namely the wine of Paradise. It is extremely unlikely for example that earthly wine ever crossed the lips of 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1236), the greatest of Arab Sufi poets and the author of the famous *Khamriyyah* (Winesong) which begins:

'We have drunk to the remembrance of the Beloved a wine
wherewith we were made drunk before the vine was created.'

¹⁸Of the two blessings invoked on the Messenger, it is that of Peace which corresponds to sobriety, whereas that of being whelmed in Glory corresponds to drunkenness.

¹⁹See for example *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, p. 168. The Shaykh al-'Alawī uses here the term 'uprootedness' (*iṣṭilām*) more or less as an equivalent of drunkenness.

²⁰It must be remembered however that whereas *qabd* is merely an approach, *fanā* is the actual passage through 'the eye of the needle' and therefore cannot be altogether dissociated from its immediate result of *bast* and perhaps also of *sukr* (drunkenness).

The second part, 'His is the Kingdom and His this Praise, and He is Infinite in Power' is an expression of the Divine Plentitude—for *baqā* is at the level of Absolute Reality which excludes all being other than His Being. The already quoted saying 'I went in and left myself outside' could be paraphrased: 'Leaving myself outside (*fānā*) I went in and found none but myself (*baqā*)'. We may quote also the lines of Shustarī:²¹

After extinction I came out and I
Eternal now am, though not as I,
Yet who am I, O I, but I?

The last formula of the litany is an expression of truth and the subjective counterpart of truth is knowledge. Analogously, in relation to the first and second formulae, instead of *qabd* and *bast* we may use the terms 'fear' and 'love'; and this brings out even more clearly the basic importance of this litany as an epitome of Sufism which is often said to consist of fear (*makhāfah*), love (*mahabbah*), and knowledge (*ma'rifah*), inasmuch as these three standpoints comprise between them the whole of man's subjective obligation towards God. Nor is there anything permissible for man with regard to God which they do not comprise.

Meditation (*fikr*) which is an essential aspect of the spiritual path as an accompaniment to *dhikr*, is based on these three standpoints, each of which has two aspects. For example, fear implies danger. One solution is flight. *Flee unto God*²² says the Qur'an, and *There is no refuge from God except in Him*²³ which recalls the Holy Tradition: 'Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh is My fortress, and whoso entereth My fortress is safe from Mine anger.' But danger is also a motive for attack and this standpoint, which is that of the Greater Holy War, has already been touched on.

Both aspects of fear are related to duty and therefore to will-power. 'Human nature comprises three planes: the plane

²¹ An Andalusian Sufi (d. 1269).

²² LI: 50.

²³ IX: 118.

of the will, the plane of love and the plane of knowledge; each plane is polarised into two complementary modes which appear, respectively, as renunciation and action, peace and fervour, discernment and union.²⁴ The third plane transcends man as such, except insofar as it offers him a theme for meditation. ‘The two stations or degrees of knowledge could be respectively characterised by the following formulae: “To know only That which is: God”; “To be only That which knows: the Self”.’²⁵

For the Sufi the great source of meditation is the Qur’ān itself; and with special reference to Sufism the author of the above passages quotes elsewhere²⁶ Quranic verses to illustrate the profound connection between *dhikr* and *fikr*, that is, between the act of invoking and the different modes of conformity to it which are to be induced into the soul by meditation: *Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God?*²⁷ *Call upon Him in fear and in eager desire;*²⁸ *Call upon God in humility and in secret.*²⁹

The word ‘fear’ can be taken here to include both its modes, and this station has already been illustrated from other verses. The two modes of love are ‘peace’ and ‘eager desire’,³⁰

²⁴Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 148.

²⁵Ibid., p. 153. I know of no writing on meditation which can compare with the final chapter of this book unless it be the closing pages of another book by the same author where the six stations of wisdom are defined as antidotes to the six ‘great troubles of the soul’ (see *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Sophia Perennis, 1987), p. 211).

²⁶In an unpublished text.

²⁷XIII: 28.

²⁸VII: 56.

²⁹VII: 55.

³⁰Peace implies the possession of all that one loves. The realism of this standpoint, like that of the other already given examples of the methodic *ka’anna* (as if) of Sufism, lies in the deceptiveness of appearances. In reality the absence of the Beloved is pure illusion, as was expressed by the Moroccan Sufi poet Muḥammad al-Ḥarrāq (a spiritual grandson of the great Shaykh ad-Darqāwī) in the following lines:

‘Seekest thou Laylā, when she in thee is manifest?’

whereas the last verse affirms the two stations of knowledge as bases for the invocation. The truest humility, as enacted in the prostration of the ritual prayer, is no less than *fanā'*, extinction. As to secrecy, it is a question of 'Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth'. The 'left hand' in this case is the human ego which is excluded from participating in this profoundest of all invocations where the Self is the Invoker as well as the Invoked.

The Qur'an continually stresses the importance of meditation, as do also the sayings of the Prophet; and in fact *dhikr* and *fikr* may be said to have a function in the spiritual life which is as vital as that of the blood and the veins in the life of the body. Without *fikr*, *dhikr* would be largely inoperative; without *dhikr*, *fikr* would serve no purpose. Meditation predisposes the soul to receive the invocation by opening up channels along which it may flow. It is a question of overcoming all those habits and reactions which are strictly speaking unnatural but which have become 'second nature'. As the above quoted author remarks in another unpublished text on Sufism: 'The result of the persevering practice of comprehension—by meditation—is the inward transformation of the imagination or the subconscious, the acquisition of reflexes that conform to spiritual reality. It is all very well for the intelligence to affirm metaphysical or eschatological truths; the imagination—or subconscious—nonetheless continues to believe firmly in this world, not in God or the next world; every man is *a priori* hypocritical. The way is precisely the passage from natural hypocrisy to spiritual sincerity.'

Thou countest her other, yet other than thee she is not.'

(Bughyat al-Mushtaq, p. 170, Bulaq, 1881;

with regard to Laylā see above, p. 54, note 21)

Nor has the other standpoint of love, that of 'eager desire', merely the relative realism of corresponding to a lack that is actually experienced even though it be illusory. This standpoint is above all realist in virtue of the Object of desire, *The Infinitely Precious (al-ʿAzīz)* in whose Eternal Present eagerness can never grow old.

This last word is the key to the understanding of the whole chapter. In defining the spiritual ideal, the Qur'ān uses more than once the phrase *sincere unto Him in religion* which means, with regard to the Object in question, total absence of reserve and total assent.

The practices of Sufism need to be varied in order to meet the variety and complexity of the human soul, whose every element must be impregnated with sincerity in both its aspects. *Riḍwān*, Acceptance, is mutual,³¹ and sincerity is nothing other than the human *riḍā*³² without which there can be no Divine Acceptance.



³¹See above, p. 42, note 16.

³²This is the term normally used to express the human reflection and complement of *Riḍwān*.