

Sufi Teachings

Retreat with Nigel Wali Hamilton, Camp 2004

26 – 30 July 2004 (first week)

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Monday, 26 July 2004

We have an opportunity this week to explore the Sufi teachings and to do it in the context of a retreat. Sufism gives us the opportunity to draw on many of the different esoteric teachings, the teachings of alchemy, Islam, some of the Christian Gnostic teachings, knowledge of the Kabbalah, and also of more recent times, the teachings of the Yogis and the Buddhists. So there is a complete fusion of spiritual teachings that comes through Sufism. We must remember what both Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan and Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan say, that this is the religion of the heart. What we are looking for is a spiritual experience that comes through the heart. In fact this is what is behind all those spiritual teachings: *In the heart of the human being lies the secret of all spirituality.*

Now how do we get to that heart? That's what we're here for. First of all we work our way through our personal problems and our personal ways of seeing things, then we begin to follow the deeper longing of our heart. That eventually begins to lead us into a very still inner place, and that's where the journey begins.

Ya Shahid, the Witness

So let's start with a wonderful spiritual practice: Sufis speak of the word "the witness", which in Arabic is called *ya Shahid*. *Shahid* is the witness, but who is the witness? Well, your mind is one kind of witness, but it's an unreliable witness, it can sometimes turn against you. It criticizes you, it says there are better things to do elsewhere, and of course it has the freedom to doubt. And then there is the other kind of witness, which we call the true witness, and it is what the Iranian Sufis call your **celestial counterpart**. It is *you*, of course, but you have forgotten. This is the secret: when you are watching yourself, it is a mixture of your mind and the celestial counterpart. The witness at the moment is both, and so it is like two voices in the head. What you have to learn to do is to gradually fade out the false one; the other one, which is a much quieter one, then eventually begins to come to the foreground. When you become conscious of your celestial counterpart, which is your angel, you are much more conscious of your light. Whereas when you are in your mind, you are much more conscious of your thoughts.

What we will be working on, on this retreat, is **moving from our thoughts to experience our being of light**. That's not an easy journey, it's a real struggle, and in that struggle things may get worse for a short while. This is where alchemy is very helpful, because they describe this as the dark night of the mind. You go through an experience where you start out all enthusiastic on your retreat, and then your mind rebels and you get to a point where you're confused and not sure what you're doing. That's where all your personal issues come up, your sense of inadequacy, or your anger, or a sense of injustice, and so on. We have to be patient enough to accept that that's part of the process, but we know also that behind all that, quietly waiting, is that other voice, that other sense of self.

All of that is behind this practice of *ya Shahid*, the witness. So when we say “*ya Shahid*”, in the beginning it’s our mind that’s saying it, in other words you concentrate on the *wasifa*. That’s your first step, concentration. The mind, which normally likes to do what it wants to do, is required to stay focused on the *wasifa*. The secret is: when the mind actually is harnessed, like a horse is harnessed, it gets in sync with the celestial counterpart. Then you get a free ride, you’re no longer trying to ride, something carries you. That is the experience of your light.

So the first step is concentration, the mind begins to slowly get in sync with what’s behind *ya Shahid*, and then eventually you begin to experience something, it’s no longer just the mind. That’s the point of meditation. **You go from concentration to meditation**, and at that point you’re beginning to experience something of the *wasifa*.

Practice: *ya Shahid*

We start with a silence, and in this silence we practice what the Sufis call the *fikr* of the breath, which means silently watching your breath, so the mind is taken up with the rhythm of the breath. It’s very important to do this before you do a *wasifa* practice.

- Silence.

If your mind is starting to wander, bring it back to your breath.

- First stage: Saying the *wasifa* out aloud.

Now we do the practice silently on the breath: as you think of *Shahid*, think of it on the in-breath and on the out-breath. That’s the *fikr* of *Shahid*.

- Second stage: *fikr*.

The third stage of the practice, which the Sufis call the *fikr as-Sirr*, is a state of meditation on the *wasifa* itself. You are no longer conscious of the breath, but simply conscious of the *wasifa* in your meditation. Simply allow the presence of *Shahid*, think of *Shahid* as not just an abstract word in Arabic; it is a vibration that has a presence, what the Sufis call *hadrat*, presence. This spiritual presence is a condition of the spirit that manifests itself as *Shahid*. You experience that presence when you are identified with your celestial counterpart, your angel. We are surrendering ourselves to that presence, that’s what we mean by meditating on *Shahid*. Rather than thinking of *Shahid* as an object to concentrate on, you actually become *Shahid* because you feel the presence of it. You no longer think of the word *Shahid*, but you tune in to its presence, its atmosphere. That can only be sensed when we are still and we are silent.

-Third stage: *fikr as-Sirr*.

So we’ve had an experience of the three ways of practicing *Shahid*. We are in effect experiencing three different kinds of rhythms. These three rhythms are spoken of by Hazrat Inayat Khan as the rhythms of the mind:

- In the first rhythm, the mind is dominant, and unless you can concentrate on *Shahid*, the mind becomes chaotic. It’s a fast rhythm. The nature of the mind is quick.
- The second rhythm is progressive. By that he means that you can make progress, in your personal life. The mind is not so dominant, but it’s a mixture of the influence of

your soul and the influence of the mind. That's when we're saying the *fikr* of *Shahid*: it's very internal, quietly working and progressing inwardly.

- The third rhythm is a slow rhythm, eventually it becomes so slow it becomes still. That's the rhythm of meditation, when the mind is quietly floating with the experience. The mind becomes transparent to the experience; it is in sync together with the soul that is also experiencing the experience.

These three rhythms go with the three stages of practicing the *wasifa*.

This comes back to the subject of alchemy. In alchemy, the first step is to still the mind. Mercury is the substance that is used to symbolize the mind because it's very reactive, very quick to move, sometimes called quicksilver. So when you still the mind, your consciousness becomes very deep, and that's when you go into the heart. That's why Sufism is called the religion of the heart; until you still the mind, you can't experience the depth of the heart. It's in the depth of the heart that you begin to awaken spiritually. You experience your celestial counterpart, you experience the Holy Spirit, you experience your being as light. As it becomes still, the mind has to change its way of operating, away from thinking about the outside world to slowly turning within and slowing down, paying attention to what's happening in the heart. Everything slows down, and then you experience a much more fundamental rhythm that's behind your life force.

A simple way of thinking about this is provided by Hazrat Inayat Khan when he talks about the image of the sea, or a lake. On the surface of the sea there are the waves, and that symbolizes the activity of the mind, the quick mind that's thinking fast all the time. The depth of the sea is really an experience of the capacity of your heart, in which everything is much more still, an enormous potential. That's a way of relating that metaphor to the three rhythms, the three ways of practicing *Shahid*. It's also a way of describing very quickly what our process is going to be on retreat.

So now we'll do the reverse. We'll start with a silence, the *fikr as-Sirr* of *Shahid*, then we'll bring the silence back to saying *Shahid* on the breath, and we'll end up saying *Shahid* aloud. It's a way of bringing ourselves back into the physical world. So we begin with the *fikr as-Sirr*: simply allow the presence of *Shahid* to occupy you. This is like being at the bottom of the sea, the ocean is vast and still, but it has a presence.

- *Fikr as-Sirr*

Now we move to the next step, which is the *fikr* of *Shahid*. Think of *Shahid* on the in-breath and on the out-breath.

- *Fikr*

Then the last step, we are saying *ya Shahid* aloud, to bring ourselves back into the mind and the body.

- *Ya Shahid*, aloud

Amen.

We take a break now.

The Five Dimensions of Prayer

1. Thanksgiving

Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan has talked about prayer in terms of the five aspects of prayer. The first aspect is thanksgiving. In America they have a national holiday for it: it was the time when they were starving and the Indians gave the immigrants the knowledge of what to grow, which was corn, because all the crops they had tried to grow failed. And so on Thanksgiving Day they all sit down and have turkey and corn, cornbread, corn coffee. In the Lord's Prayer, "give us our daily bread" is another way of thanksgiving. Or when we say grace, "oh Thou the Sustainer", that is also giving thanks. So this is one dimension of prayer.

We are not talking about different kinds of prayer, but of different dimensions. You can't really separate out the dimensions, but you can recognize them, they are present in our prayer.

2. Repentance

The second dimension of prayer is repentance. In the Christian orthodox prayer *Kyrie eleison*, "oh Lord have mercy upon me", we are asking forgiveness. It's the time when we recognize our wrongdoings or we recognize that the way of life we have chosen is not right for us.

3. Supplication

The third dimension of prayer is supplication, it's being prepared to give up your personal will and submit it to the divine will. That's expressed in prayer when we bow. When we refuse to bow, you say "I will not", that's your pride speaking. And then you come to recognize the foolishness of your pride and it gives way and you are prepared to bow to a greater power. There are lots of ways in which we practice this kind of prayer, we can bow to the earth, not only to give thanks for what the earth provides us, but also one can bow to the wisdom of the earth. For example one thinks that one can improve upon nature, sometimes it is possible and sometimes it is not, and then you recognize there are ways that nature knows and we don't know. Then you bow to the wisdom of nature. We not only surrender to a higher power, but also to a greater wisdom.

All these dimensions of prayer are connected with the heart. In Buddhism they talk about the knots of the heart you have to untie on the spiritual path. Each knot is like a little stranglehold on the heart, so every time you open up to another dimension of prayer, it's like a little knot unties itself in the heart. So if we say: "I can't feel anything", what we are saying is: "I'm knotted up, my heart is tied up." And when your heart is broken, then the knots are undone.

4. Inspiration

The fourth dimension of prayer is inspiration. When we say the prayer *Saum*, the first prayer, "Praise be to Thee, most supreme God", we are lifting ourselves up, because we feel lifted and inspired. Sometimes we are inspired by the thought of the divine, and sometimes we are lifted. The Prophet Mohammad spoke about the journey of the *Miraj*, which is a journey during a dream or a spiritual experience where he was taken to a state of unity with God, and he was challenged as to that claim. They said to him, "Lift one leg off the ground", so he lifted one leg off the ground, "and now lift both legs off the ground". Of course he couldn't, so they said: "How can you claim that you got taken all the way to heaven if you can't lift two feet off the ground?" So Mohammad said, "I didn't claim I could lift two feet off the ground, I was *taken* to heaven". The image used was the image of the horse, *Buraq* that carried Mohammad to God.

The interesting thing is that *buraq* refers to the breath. So it was the inspiring breath that took him to a state of unity. In Sufi terms it's called the breath of *shaghal*. There is a great mystery to *shaghal*; it's the power of *shaghal* to transport us. That is the dimension of inspiration. You can be inspired by a thought, an action or a gesture, like lifting yourself up, or you can be inspired by feeling. Of course all those three are linked to the idea that breath lifts you. So eventually we'll make a link between the five dimensions of prayer and breath.

5. Oneness

The fifth dimension of prayer is the experience of Oneness with God. It begins when we recognize that there is *one* God, the God of all religions, the God of all beings, the God that is no God. God is not another person or an object, God is everything, that's what the Buddhists say.

The fifth dimension is a state of balance, there is no one direction that pulls us. If you think of the other four directions: Thanksgiving means that we are sustained by the earth, from below us. In repentance we become flowing like water. The third direction, supplication, is when we bow down and are lifted, and in the fourth one we are inspired, we are lifted but also expand. These are all different spatial dimensions that the consciousness moves in. But in the fifth dimension, unity, there is no direction. We aren't pulled in any one direction, neither down, nor up, nor in, nor out, nor backwards or forwards, everything is in balance. That is the state of unity. If there was a movement in any direction it wouldn't be union, there would be a tension pulling you in one direction. Unity is a state of contentment, fulfillment. You are not hungry for anything, there is no need for thanksgiving, there is no sense of need for forgiveness or resentment because your conscience is clear, so no repentance, there is no question of your will and God's Will, since the two are one, so there is no supplication needed, you are not inspired or lifted, because in being one with God, one doesn't have to be lifted, you are really there. In that sense there is complete balance, directionless.

The Five Element Breaths

We will explore these five dimensions of prayer and link them with breath. What do you think, the first dimension prayer, thanksgiving, what might that be linked to? The breaths are linked with the elements, so the first dimension would be linked with earth.

1. Earth Breath, Thanksgiving

The earth nourishes us, supports us, not only the earth but other people, they help us when we are in trouble, and sometimes when you are sitting in front of your guide, and your guide says, "How are your *wasaiif* (plural of *wasifa*) going?" and your mind goes blank and you can't think of what they are, and you panic and you say, "Oh God, please help me to remember", and then of course there is the answer of your *wasaiif* and you are so grateful. And your guide says: "Now you are glowing with light, your practices are really helping you". That's thanksgiving, it relates to the earth. The earth can provide us all kinds of things, from remembering things, to sustenance, to physical health or psychological health. We give thanks to the earth, giving thanks to your mother who gave birth to you. Mother as your physical mother and also Mother as earth. You know the American Indian chant "Thank you for this day, Lord, thank you for this day"; the American Indian tradition is very connected to the earth, the recognition of God in the earth, God as earth.

Let's start with the practice of the first breath, the earth breath, in its simplified form **breathing in and out through the nose**. Why do we breathe in and out through the nose? The nose links to the base chakra, and the base chakra connects to the earth. So you are connecting the breath channels psychically all the way to the base chakra, and in the base chakra it connects through your legs to the soles of your feet, and that's where the earth magnetism comes through, it comes up through the feet to the base chakra. That's all involved in the first breath. We breathe in very slowly into the nose, you draw the breath through your feet, and you breathe out through the nose, back down through your feet.

We can also link the *wasaiif* to the breath. One of the *wasaiif* that could be linked to the earth breath would be *Mawjud*. It's the existentionation of the divine in the earth, in a physical form, God as the rock, God as the earth, God in physical form, God as the human body. You think of *Mawjud*, and as you breathe in, draw the energy up through the soles of your feet into the base chakra, and as you breathe out, feel the energy flowing. There actually is an energy line, relating to the acupuncture lines, that comes up from the inside of the foot, goes all the way up, on the inside of the leg and goes around to the base chakra; both left and right foot. That actually is an energy line, one day you may feel it, sometimes there is a tingling along that line, or you may even feel energy being pulled up when you are doing the earth breath. So when we say keep your feet flat on the ground that means God is in the earth too.

That's the first dimension of prayer. Now let's spend a few moments in meditation together, tuning in to thanksgiving, and in your meditation to reflect on the things you can be grateful for.

Practice: Meditation on thanksgiving

What helps us in this dimension of prayer is the Sufi concept of *Himma*. *Himma* is difficult to translate directly; it does mean concentration, heart-felt longing, meditation. All these things together while you are giving thanks, concentrating on what you can give thanks for, and there is a longing to experience the presence of God amongst all this, and your being is meditating on the words of the prayer. One is immersed in prayer. When you give thanks,

your whole body is giving thanks. You give thanks for everything everyone has given you. Then it becomes a heart-opening experience. **There is a gratefulness of your heart, and that helps to open the heart.** So the earth breath is more than just breathing in and out through your nose, it's experiencing the richness of everything that's been given to you all the time. It's thankfulness for being able to be alive, to experience the opportunity of this life. Yes, there are problems and difficulties, but there are also opportunities. The focus is not on what's missing in life, but you give thanks for what is enriching your life and what is present in your life. It's a prayerful experience where one fills up with gratitude.

2. Water Breath, Repentance

Now to the second dimension of prayer, which is repentance. It corresponds to the first stage of spiritual awakening. Mostly when we say prayers in the different cultures that we come from, one says prayers to say thanks for the life that you have, thanks for health or whatever it might be. But not very often do we actually begin to question our conscience or question ourselves. So in this dimension of prayer, when you do pray, you begin to recognize in your life and in yourself that you are not happy with what's going on, not happy with yourself. You know there is another way of being that could manifest in you, so you begin to regret what you have done, what you're caught up in. One begins to ask forgiveness. You realize that your life has maybe taken a wrong direction, or you made the wrong decisions, or maybe you are intoxicated by some aspects of life which kind of misled you, and you lost your sense of self. At this stage one is confused; one has regret, but **the mere act of asking forgiveness releases the spirit that's in you.** It releases the Holy Spirit or the spiritual life in you that's blocked up.

In asking forgiveness you are in touch with the pain of all the things that you know aren't right in your life. Maybe it's things that you long for and you feel resentful about. But in asking forgiveness for your resentment you actually are opening up the water element. It's most poignant when someone is dying or has died and you want to ask their forgiveness, like the last chance before you say good-bye. You don't want to be left with something that you have to carry for the rest of your life, and in the moment of asking forgiveness, the floodgates open and you begin to cry, tears start to flow, something starts to move in you, and that's the spirit. In so many prayers there is that dimension of asking forgiveness and forgiving others. When the water breath starts working in you and you become conscious of the fluidity of your being, I don't mean literally the physical water, but the fluid nature, the aura around you, it means you are no longer holding on, you're not stuck. We hold on to resentments, so we feel stuck. Or we feel stuck because we feel guilty. Some people feel ashamed of something in their life, and therefore they stay away from their family, ashamed to admit what's happened or where they failed or whatever it is, and so out of guilt they remain stuck in relation to their family. In being able to repent or ask forgiveness, what you do is releasing all that stuckness.

Let's work with this practice now. In fact, every day we have little resentments that build up or things we feel guilty about. You can never say, "I've done enough forgiveness now", because things are happening all the time, so it's a state of being you have to cultivate. Repentance means that state of being that is always flowing. So when people are nasty to you, angry with you, you don't have to react back. Or if there is something you can't get that you want, instead of being resentful about it, you accept that and you work another way around. That is what the Sufis mean by the way of repentance, it's an awakening to the spirit that expresses itself in you. We call that our conscience; the Sufis call it the practice of *Muhāsaba*, the examination of conscience. So let's take a few minutes to silently look at things that you begin to remember as you look into yourself, and you begin to discover feelings that you weren't so conscious of, resentful feelings. We can combine it with the **water breath: you**

breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. As you breathe out through the mouth, it's the act of letting go, letting go of all that stuff. In asking forgiveness we can let go.

Practice: Water breath.

It's a very important spiritual practice, because it's to do with dissolving the ego in you. Letting go of resentment, of a particular attitude or feeling that you are holding. In the act of dissolving, the spirit is in water, kind of baptism of water that takes place, **the spirit of water in you cleanses your conscience.** And it's a very healing experience.

There was a man who was working for me, and he said: "I have to go away, I have problems at home and with my family, I need to sort it out." And so he was away for about two months, then he came back and he said, "There is something I need to talk to you about, it's very important. Something I have to get off my chest." I thought actually he was cross with me, so I was worrying what have I done to him? Anyway, we sat down to have this meeting, and he said: "I have something to confess. It was a lie when I said to you I had to go and see my parents. I've been in jail. I was sent to prison for theft." Of course he was shaking with fear as he said this, he was scared I was going to give him the sack, tell him to leave. Of course I was relieved that he wasn't cross with me, so I said: Oh! And he told me he'd been cheated by somebody he was working for and he was so angry at that man that he had taken some money as payment for what he was promised, and then he was reported to the police and he was arrested. So I simply said to him: "Well, if you promise not to get involved in trouble like that ever again, then we can forget about it. That's all that needs to be said." And I was genuinely not angry with him, I actually didn't feel deceived in that moment, but felt some compassion for the man. I felt he was genuine in telling the truth and also asking forgiveness. We concluded our talk and I said: "Make sure you don't get into trouble again", and he broke down into tears, because he had expected the worst. What happened was a kind of cleansing for him as he could let go of what he was holding in himself, fear and resentment. Of course since that time he's been extremely enthusiastic, working harder and showing me that he is grateful. Of course it doesn't always work out that way, but in this instance it has.

The cleansing of conscience is a washing of oneself clean, and the spirit gives you a new energy in your new life, new enthusiasm. It's repentance. The Sufi practice that goes with this stage of prayer is asking forgiveness, so one thinks of the bowing practice, bowing and asking forgiveness, surrendering yourself. The perfect practice for that is either *Kyrie eleison*, *Christe eleison*, or the Sufi practice of the *dhikr*. It's a practice of surrender and also repentance. We bow as we say *illa*, and then we lift our body up and we say *'llah*, and then we say *Hu*. You go over in your conscience all the things that you are aware of, one at a time. Each time you say *illa*, you are going into that aspect of conscience, then you say *'llah*, which is kind of letting go, asking forgiveness, and then *Hu*, everything blows through you, cleans you.

Practice: *illa 'llah Hu*

After the break we will work with the other three dimensions of prayer, supplication, inspiration and union. Let's have a few minutes silence before we finish.

Break.

In reviewing what we did just now: We see thanksgiving as one dimension of prayer, connected to the earth. It is a purification by the earth element. The act of gratefulness for what we receive purifies the heart and gets us out of that position always feeling that you don't have enough, always wanting more. So when we celebrate, we sit down and we eat

and drink together, that's an act of purification. When we celebrate we are grateful for all the things we have received.

The act of forgiveness and repentance, the second dimension of prayer, is a purification by water, because it means that we have let go of the things that we feel stuck in. Like you feel you can't go back to a place because you are angry or guilty, or you can't speak to someone because they've done something to you or you have done something to them. This dimension of prayer reminds us of asking God to forgive us, but it's also reminding you to do the same thing yourself. So it's purification by water.

In alchemy they do the same thing; purification by earth is called *coagulatio*, purification by water is *solutio*. All these different traditions are talking about the same thing, whether you want to look at it from the point of view of prayer or of purification through the elements, or you look at it from the point of view of a system like alchemy, it's still the same thing.

3. Fire Breath, Supplication

Now we move on to the next dimension of prayer, which is supplication. This dimension of prayer is to do with the fire of our being. One of the great principles in Sufism is to **convert the fire in us to light**. But you have to have fire in the first place before you can make it light, so if you don't have any fire, you need to first of all develop your fire. We sometimes call that passion, or anger, and once it's there we need to refine it and make it something very beautiful. Fire can be dangerous because we want to assert ourselves by dominating others; fire can be self-defensive, we're accused of something and we deny it and get angry with people; or you assert your will over other people. That's when fire is dangerous or ugly.

But there comes a point when the fire not so much burns itself out, but changes to light. That is when you are willing to no longer assert yourself, but to serve a higher purpose, a higher cause, not just for yourself but for others too. We have to deal with two negative emotions first, if we want to convert the fire to light, with **the emotions of pride and envy**. Like when a person is too proud to admit they made a mistake, or their pride keeps them away from other people, they say those people aren't as good as me, so I don't talk to them. The extreme of pride is arrogance. Envy goes side by side with pride, because instead of feeling proud about something in yourself you feel that you haven't got something in yourself and somebody else has got it, so you are envious. When you are envious of other people, not only does it eat away at you, but you do things which undermine the other person. So when somebody says: "I had a wonderful retreat with so and so", and you feel envious, you say: "Yes, but I saw them take chocolates with their retreat too." It's a way of subtly undermining a person. Envy can be very destructive. Sometimes we are chosen to do things and sometimes other people are chosen to do things, so sometimes you are the one that people are envious of and sometimes others are the people who you are envious of.

These are just examples of the way fire manifests, like anger and so on, but we are talking about this dimension of prayer, supplication. **The answer to pride and to envy is to be able to surrender to that which is greater**. When you are proud of something it's important also to recognize that you have been given something, for instance that ability to do something, so you're proud of it, but it's been given to you, it's not for you to hold on to. And when you feel God hasn't given you enough, you feel inadequate, you feel that somebody else has something more that you want, you are looking outside and comparing yourself with others. But when you surrender to God, that which is *in* you can manifest, you feel richer then, so you no longer need to be envious. It is a very powerful dimension of prayer. When we are prepared to surrender to a higher power, or to surrender our own personal desires for that

which is greater, then something happens in your consciousness that changes the fire and it turns into light. That becomes much more powerful, and also it doesn't burn people. Light is very gentle, but it can be very penetrating, goes right through. Instead of hitting someone over the head with the truth, you can say something in a way that subtly gets through to them, that's light versus fire.

Practice: Fire to light

Let's begin with a practice of this dimension of prayer, in which we are saying: *Thy Will, not my will*. The breath practice is **breathing in through the mouth and out through the nose**. When breathing in through the mouth, you imagine the fire in the solar plexus, and then you breathe out through the nose and the fire is transformed through the heart to light, so that light is radiated all around you. It connects with the solar plexus chakra and the heart chakra; those are the two that are involved in this practice. From the point of view of metaphysics or the point of view of psychology, it's your will that's connected to the solar plexus, and when we surrender we experience God's Will through the heart. So breathe in and imagine the fire of your being in the solar plexus, then you breathe out through the nose, fire becomes light, you radiate light all around you.

We could add a prayer for the practice, and of course there are many ways of doing this. The one I would choose is the *dhikr* as a prayer. The *dhikr* was an inspiration given as a prayer to Mohammad, it's a way of expressing the unity of God, through the words: *La ilaha illa 'llah Hu*, "there is no God save God". It's a way also of saying, "I'm no longer prepared to put myself at the center of my life, but to put God in the center of my life." So that's the meaning of that practice for all of us; instead of filling your heart with your pride, with your concept of yourself, it's emptying yourself, as you surrender, and allowing the Spirit of God to fill your heart. In some way it's very similar to the sacred practice we did in the act of repentance, when we said the bowing *dhikr*. And the breath is similar in the sense that it's the reverse of the water breath. They are both connected to each other. Asking for forgiveness is the first step, and in saying *there is no God save God*, recognizing that *in* yourself, that's your second step.

Let's practice the *dhikr* together for a few minutes as a way of acknowledging this dimension of prayer. The *dhikr* of course is a prayer, but this dimension is always present in every prayer that we say: Surrendering to a higher will.

The movement of the *dhikr*: You start from the left shoulder, move your head down in a circle and end up back at the top, *la ilaha*, then we bow and we say *illa*. It's very important when we say *illa* that we go through the solar plexus, because that is where the will is centered. It can become hard and impenetrable. Then we lift our head and lay *'llah* in the heart, so your heart now is filled with the presence of God, and then we complete it with *Hu*, which the Sufis always add. *Hu* is acknowledging the divine presence in all things.

Remember that the whole attunement of this practice now is one of surrender, surrendering yourself.

Practice: Dhikr

So this is a purification by fire. It's interesting that Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan said that there is nothing that cannot be accomplished through the practice of *dhikr*. So you think of using your will wanting to do things and accomplish things and discovering your limitation, and then, strangely enough, by surrendering your will and stop trying and struggling, something greater comes through you. Of course it doesn't work in a way that you say: "Oh well, I won't even try." You have to struggle first and experience the frustration of your own

personal limitation. That's when it gets very fiery, you get cross with yourself, you get cross with God, people sometimes say: "Why do something like the *dhikr*, it's such a strange practice and it doesn't help me." That's really another way of saying, "I discovered my limitation when I did the practice." But **you have to kind of take yourself to your limits and then you surrender**. That's when the spirit begins to move in you. The fire doesn't go out, but that's the moment when the fire gets transformed to light.

There are only two realms basically, forget about all the planes, and the two realms are: the realm of fire, the garden of fire, and the realm of light. It's very similar to the old Judeo-Christian idea of heaven and hell. We create it ourselves. So when you're stuck with your own limitations and you are frustrated, then it's a kind of experience of your own hell. And when you surrender to a greater power in yourself, that's when you experience freedom and the spirit or the light opens up in you. So in a sense fire is almost like a dark spirit. It can burn. Light is pure spirit. But we all have that dark spirit in us, and you should be grateful you have it, because without it, you'd have no fire. So it's important to have desires, a longing to accomplish things, these are all important, but the point is what you do with it. It's not bad to have desires, to have ambition, but it's what you do with it. Do you offer it in service to something higher, or do you want to get something for yourself. That's what this dimension really is about, surrendering to a higher power.

In terms of the chakras, I forgot to mention, the first dimension of prayer is related to the earth and the **base chakra**. The second dimension of prayer, which is repentance, is related to the water element, and that is related to the sacrum center, **sacrum chakra**. That's why we work with the mouth; the mouth is that aspect of your body, which connects to the sacrum center. When you experience the opening up of the base chakra, which is related to the nose, then you can smell things, first burning, which is the fire, and then all kinds of aromas. Similarly when you experience the awakening of the sacrum center, you experience different kinds of tastes. Think of all the tastes that we enjoy in this world, different foods, there are the counterparts in the higher realms, which are more subtle, that you begin to taste without the experience of food. So instead of taking something in the mouth, you find it in yourself.

The third dimension of prayer, related to fire, relates to the **solar plexus chakra**.

4. Air Breath, Inspiration

Now we go to the fourth dimension, inspiration. Inspiration relates to the air element. When you feel depressed, the trouble is you always look downwards, and you won't find any inspiration there. Murshid says you must change your direction of looking, look upwards to the sky, particularly when the sky is clear, then you see the light. The blue sky gives you inspiration.

I remember a case of a man who was a salesman, a very good salesman, and he was selling a proposal to a group of bankers. Bankers, as you know, are very grounded people, not like the Sufis, they deal with facts and figures. This man had the ability to describe a scheme for a whole set of buildings and he was describing in a very inspiring way. It's very hard to inspire bank managers, so you have to be in touch with this dimension of prayer. Anyway, these people were inspired to such an extent that they could actually see what he was saying, and they took it as though it was real. Problem was, they never questioned him what stage of reality this scheme had reached. He built it in their minds, by inspiration. So of course they gave him the money, they believed him. That's great art, you believe in yourself, you believe what you say then other people will believe you too. And now you know how to get a bank loan.

This is related to the air breath, the inspiration that we find in the sky. **We breathe in and out through the mouth**, very gently. It's not a strong breath, otherwise you intoxicate yourself with oxygen, you breathe very slowly and gently, and you empty your mind, like the sky. Think that the thoughts are like clouds, so you empty the mind of thoughts and it's like a brilliant blue sky.

The chakra that is involved in this is the **heart center**. That's where the lungs are, so it's where the air is. The spiritual practice that we can do is a form of the *dhikr* that is uplifting and inspiring: *Allah Hu*. *Allah* into the heart, *Hu* lifts us up. The Sufis often do the chanting of *Allah Hu*, the whole atmosphere lifts and lifts until you feel everyone is flying.

Practice: Allah Hu

5. Ether Breath, Oneness

The fifth dimension of prayer is the perfect balance. In Sufism they often talk about *nafs*; *nafs* means appetites or breaths. Those appetites gradually become refined as you awaken spiritually, and so at this stage the *nafs* become the *nafs-e-Salima*, very peaceful and contented. There are no desires, a state of balance. The state of union with God. All of prayer is aiming towards this dimension. Without it, prayer would not make any sense. It's the answer to the question: Why do we pray? Do you pray for yourself, for this or that, or ultimately do you pray to be one with God again. It carries the purpose of prayer. It relates to the ether breath. Ether is the element that combines all the other elements in balance. **Earth, water, fire and air in perfect balance**. It's not different from earth, water, fire and air; it's made of earth, water, fire and air together, but in balance.

We breathe in through the nose and the mouth, and breathe out through the nose and the mouth. Let's do that together very slowly, very gently.

Practice: Ether breath

We observe how the atmosphere keeps changing with every breath. The earth breath is grounding, rich, the water breath is flowing, the fire breath is radiant and expansive, the air breath is uplifting, but the ether breath is very subtle. Each one has its own consciousness.

The *dhikr* practice which goes with this dimension of prayer, the unity of God, is the word *Hu*. Even when one is saying *Allah*, one thinks of God and you. But when we say *Hu*, there is no me and there is no God, it's beyond duality. So let's say that together. It's a practice you mustn't do on your own, it's a very powerful practice and it can unhinge you. We do it in a group, because a group is a container, so it can contain you. So not to do on your own for hours on end.

Practice: Hu

God bless, thank you.

Tuesday, 27 July 2004

The Consciousness of the Four Elements

This morning we want to focus on the four elements, earth, water, fire and air and to see how they form part of the construction of the *dhikr*. With any spiritual practice, particularly the *dhikr*, you can see many different dimensions. For example you could see the light that the *dhikr* generates, you can see the angels through the *dhikr*, you can see souls on other realms, who have departed from this world, and you can also see the planes of consciousness, and one can see the elements. The elements really are the first step, so we mustn't think of them just as four purification breaths, although that's the first step, it's very important to be able to feel each element, because each element has a consciousness. That consciousness will move the energy in a particular direction.

Earth

So for the earth, the direction that the earth moves in is always **horizontal**. We see this from the planet that we live in, the earth, which will always move itself in such a way that it will become flat. The mountains are slowly coming down. There is another element that causes the mountains to lift, that is fire, the volcanoes. You can see the influence of the earth element all around you, for example when you look at a building. Buildings that are spread out have a more earth like influence in them. You see that when you travel in Africa, the buildings are flat, whereas in Europe we tend to like the buildings go up high.

In the *dhikr* the earth element is present, the *dhikr* being a basic statement of faith that the Sufi declares, *there is no God but God*. In the first line, *la ilaha*, there is no Divinity, we make a movement with the body, and although it's a circular movement from the left shoulder down in an arc and then up to the crown, actually what's happening is, we are tracing a line from the left shoulder all the way through the heart to the right shoulder. In one of the forms of the *dhikr*, that's precisely what one does, one imagines, with your eyes closed, that you are drawing a line of light across the shoulders. When Hazrat Inayat Khan first gave the *dhikr* practice to Europeans, his first mureeds, he said you do the *dhikr* with your hand, you use your finger and you trace the line of light across the heart. He thought that we were into the body, so this was a way of experiencing the *dhikr* through the body. So as you said *la ilaha*, you drew a line of light from shoulder to shoulder, across the heart. That is emphasizing the earth element, because it emphasizes the physical consciousness of the body, which we experience through touch. Our consciousness follows the touch.

The second stage then, instead of doing it with the hand was to imagine that a line of light was going from the left shoulder through the heart to the right as you said *la ilaha*. In one of the *Gatha* teachings, the horizontal line is one of the basic symbols. The basis of all symbolism is the cross. All symbolism that all spiritual teachings use is based on the combination of the horizontal and the vertical line. This is embedded in the *dhikr*.

So in the first line we say *la ilaha* and imagine the light going horizontally. It's the same as the Christian cross and also the Celtic cross; the Christian cross is longer, the Celtic cross is *la ilaha* the same height as width. What it symbolizes is those two basic dimensions of our being. So the earth element is captured in the *dhikr* through the horizontal line. When we say, the heart opens to both sides. If you just did the practice *la ilaha* and didn't do anything more than that, that is what you would experience. You would find yourself opening up more and more, becoming wider and wider. That's how we can encompass the consciousness of

other things; we have to become broader and broader, wider and wider. Imagine how difficult it would be to live on this planet if the planet was shaped in a vertical form, it would be very precarious living, if you stepped too far one way you would fall off. That's why in the beginning the people thought the planet was flat; the world was a flat disc. Our early consciousness was of the horizontal. We must not underestimate it, call it basic and skip that; unless you experience and develop that, everything else you do won't work.

Water

The second element is water. It is a very different kind of movement compared to the earth. It does tend to spread out, but it also descends. **Water comes down and spreads out.** Everything has a counterpart in the subtle world, the Sufis call it *hurqalya*. The earth has its counterpart in heaven, the water element too. And since the heavens are made of light, you realize that water is also just a more concentrated form of light, and you see this light moving in a particular direction when it appears. We see this in a waterfall that comes down from a mountain, then forms a stream and spreads out that way. We say that's the nature of water. From the scientific point of view we say water descends because there is gravity, which is true, but of course scientists don't understand what gravity is. Nobody knows what it is, or why it's there. The mystics say gravity is related to consciousness, and maybe one day we'll understand how, as consciousness incarnates, gravity develops. The material form of consciousness is so powerful that it attracts, that's gravity. Whereas when it's more dispersed like light, then it's all-pervading, but it's not magnetic, doesn't attract. The consciousness is more a presence rather than magnetic.

When we are aware of our feelings, we don't look up, but we look down. When you ask somebody, as I do working as a psychotherapist, "What are you feeling?" they either look sideways or down. That's the direction in which we access our feelings. It all makes sense, the direction of water we instinctively know, because our feelings relate very clearly to the water element; with two exceptions: fire, you explode, and joy, where we become expansive. Otherwise feelings are more watery.

How does this relate to the *dhikr*? First of all, the descent involves going down, and also it spreads out. In one of the images that the Sufis use in their teachings, they say the whole journey in a spiritual life is like being put into a well, going all the way down, it gets darker and darker, you go down and down and down first. And then you stay there in the darkness, and suddenly you begin to discover the light that's there. Then one begins to ascend. The descent is like the direction of water, coming down and you're opening out, but you are opening out from within. The psychologist asks: "What are you feeling?" You say, "I'm unhappy", he asks why you are unhappy and you tell him why. But he wants to question further and says: "What do you long for, what is your heart feeling?" And that takes you much deeper and the heart starts to open up. The ultimate answer is: "I long to be one with God, I long to be in peace with myself, I long to experience happiness, etc." Hazrat Inayat Khan says *I discovered Thee in the depth of my heart*. That's where we discover God.

Now how does this relate to the *dhikr*? The next movement after turning your head round is that you drop your head down, a downward movement and, depending on the particular Sufi order *dhikr* practice that you follow, you go in through the solar plexus, some through the navel (that's the belly button), and some even below the belly button. Basically this is a region in the body where one can enter within. The way we do that is, we say *illa*, and as we say *illa* the head comes down and it psychically strikes the solar plexus. You can hear it in the way *illa* is said, it sounds like your hand tapping a drum skin. The psychic skin around the solar plexus is very hard, it's hardened by life. We have developed different psychic defenses

for coping with the world. When we do the *dhikr*, we are penetrating those defenses. And as you do so, you encounter emotions.

The emotions on the top are more your personal emotions. You start to experience the water element, coming down and you're opening out within, which is the direction of the water element. You have to keep going, you mustn't stop there, keep going through all the feelings, layer after layer. This happens over the days or weeks or years that you practice the *dhikr*, and eventually you reach a threshold beyond which the feelings are no longer personal. Your consciousness has opened up so much it becomes cosmic. And so one starts to experience peace, stillness, joy. Yogananda, a great Yogi, said that within the heart one experiences oceans of peace and oceans of joy, that's literally what one experiences in that practice; when you say *illa*, you go in deeper and deeper, so ultimately you reach the transpersonal. That's the direction of water, if you follow it, it takes you into the depth of your being. The heart opens in terms of feelings, whereas in the earth element, when you become cosmic it's a feeling of becoming bigger, a bigger and bigger container. In the water element, you develop a container but you experience the emotion of the universe. That's why Pir Vilayat gave this beautiful talk on the beauty of the *dhikr*, because you experience the emotions that eventually become very beautiful.

Fire

The third element is fire, a very different direction to water, **fire rises and opens up**. Remember the water breath is the opposite of the fire breath. In the water breath we breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth, so you can see the direction, downwards. If you want to relax, that's what you must do, and you sort of turn within as you do that. In the fire breath you breathe in through the mouth and out through the nose, it's the opposite direction, it rises and then opens out. That's why if you have a fiery personality, you always clash with people who have a watery personality, because their natures are opposite. A watery person always wants to relax and take it easy and the fiery one always wants to get up and go. The best is if they can make a good combination.

Fire rising and opening up, you see it in a volcano, it erupts and then explodes. You don't experience the fire nature through the emotions but through the energy. It's the energy that the Yogis call the *kundalini*. Its nature is to rise. Each element is a particular form that the spirit has taken, that's the relationship between the spirit and the elements. Spirit is in all elements, but it takes a particular direction because of the consciousness of the element. So fire is spirit with an energy that rises. When people experience that kind of opening or *kundalini* awakening, which the *dhikr* causes, then you experience the energy rising, and as it rises you feel yourself expanding, vaster and vaster. It is through that practice that you experience light. That particular stage of the *dhikr* helps you see the light of your being.

Now which part of the *dhikr* would this correspond to? It is when we lay *'llah*, which stands for Allah. What one's saying is that the whole of creation is made of light. In the Bible they say "In the beginning there was the Word and the Word was God", and then came the light, and after the light the different worlds were created. That corresponds of course with the physicists' experiments that the universe began with an explosion of fire which became light. And so at this particular stage, when one is saying *'llah*, you experience everything in terms of fire and light. Saying Allah, Allah is a very fiery practice, that's why the Sufis sometimes just repeat Allah, Allah, Allah, it eventually awakens the fire and the fire turns to light.

As the fire rises, you begin to see each plane of consciousness, each dimension associated with each chakra, all the way up to the crown.

Allah enables us to experience God in a particular condition, which is the manifested condition of God. Allah is the existential God. The other word in Sufism is *Hu*, which is the transcendental God about which we cannot say anything. Through Allah, all the names of God come out, all the *wasaiif*, in other words, the manifestation of God. All the names of God come to us as light, fundamental lights.

Air

The final element is air. Air is the element which **goes in all directions**, no particular direction. The mind is said to be related to the air element, the tendency of the mind is sometimes moving in zigzag. If you have ever been with somebody who keeps changing their mind, then you know what I mean. You go shopping with them in the supermarket and they say, "I think I'll buy this", and you go with them and they say, "No, no, I think I'll go and buy that." By the time you get to the cashier you are totally disoriented. That's the mind going a little haywire. You can see that in terms of light, it becomes zigzag. That actually happens to the air element in a person, you see that in their aura. But the air element, when it's a little more balanced, is omnipresent, all directions. Expanding in all directions is its nature, so you can't contain it, you can't fix it like earth. You look at the sky and you get that sense of expansion. That's why we say, **when you want to look for inspiration, you must look at the sky**. As children, when we look for an explanation why we did something wrong, we look upwards: "What shall I say? Ah!"

There is the story of Krishna, who stole the butter or the ghee, and his mother wanted to scold him and she asked, "Have you got the butter?" He said no, no, and she just wouldn't believe him, so she said, "Open your mouth"; and he opened his mouth, and because he was Krishna, she saw the stars there. Then she was no longer cross, she was totally amazed. The child has connection to the stars; they can look upwards very easily.

In the air element it is very easy to kind of go off and expand. This is what happens in the transition between Allah and *Hu*. When we say Allah, there is not only a sense of expansion, but it's also rising, it's a bit like going out into space and you see all the stars. Allah also embraces the air element, and *Hu* as well.

When we say *Hu*, we go past the throat chakra. Once you go past the throat center, you are crossing a boundary line, the **line between life and beyond life**. In *Hu* actually we are transcending the existential world. So it's no longer rising, neither is it expanding, but we use the word **transcending**. Suddenly one goes beyond rising and expanding and one enters into the consciousness of ether.

The true experience of *Hu* is really through ether; ether is an element that doesn't actually exist, it is a consciousness that embraces earth, water, fire and air. It embraces those four elements in a way that they are perfectly balanced. In that experience of *Hu* you don't go anywhere, but you dissolve, or more precisely, you disappear. Your sense of self disappears, and that's what the Sufis call *fanâ*.

So this is a way of looking at the *dhikr* and seeing that the different directions of consciousness are embodied in it, the different elements are all contained in the *dhikr*. Now let's spend the last few minutes doing the *dhikr* together. We do it very slowly, as four different movements, to give you a chance to experience each element with each movement. The words are: *la ilaha - illa - 'ilah - Hu* .

Practice: *dhikr*.

Now we continue the *dhikr* silently, and you can focus on one element at a time, if you wish.

We'll take a break now.

Alchemy in Sufi Teachings: The Seven Operations

Someone asked about alchemy and how it has been integrated into the Sufi teachings. A brief background:

In the 20th century, the famous psychologist Carl Jung recognized that in the alchemical texts experiences were described that his patients were experiencing. He realized that alchemy was not just an outdated science where people were trying to convert lead into gold, but it was a nature knowledge that described transformation. About the same time as Jung, Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan also was speaking in lectures about the alchemical process that is involved in spiritual training. And of course his son, Pir Vilayat, also has carried that on, being a little more explicit in describing the process of alchemy as the basis of spiritual retreat. If we go back maybe 1000 years, 1500 years, even further, you find in the ancient Sufi texts, there were very famous alchemists, Al Ghazali and Geber, people like that, who were Sufis as well. Alchemy actually is an Arabic word. The original word was *al-kimia*, the science of transformation.

The alchemists recognized that there were **stages of transformation**, and they described those stages as a cyclic process. So you can regard a retreat, for example, as a cyclic process, it has a beginning, a middle and an end, and it's a journey in a cycle. You start off at the beginning, then you go into yourself, and then you come back into the outer self. So the stages would be: facing yourself, turning within, transcending, and then returning. Those of you who might be staying on for the intensive retreat next week, you'll begin to recognize some of these stages as we go through them together.

The alchemists also described **operations that promoted transformation**. There are many different operations, I know of twelve, but the most relevant ones are seven. Four of them we described yesterday:

Coagulatio

Purification by earth. Coagulate is what happens when something goes from a fluid state to a solid state.

Solutio

Purification by water. An operation in which we experience dissolving.

Calcinatio

Purification by fire. To calcinate something is to take limestone and heat it so it breaks down into fine powder. If you do the reverse, you take slaked lime, which is a soft powder, and you give water to it; it absorbs the water and releases heat. So calcinating is to do with giving out heat and taking in heat. Fire is a very important purification

operation.

Sublimatio

Purification by air. The word sublime comes from *sublimatio*, it means that which is very subtle. If the meditation was sublime, you almost can't find words to describe it. Whereas if it was a good meditation, you just say 'good'. Good is like *coagulatio*, but not sublime. Air is linked to the dimension of prayer of the inspiration. You can be inspired by poetry, music, the beauty of nature or a meditation experience to the point that it feels sublime, rising and expanding. So *sublimatio* involves transcendence, we experience the more subtle planes of consciousness. But in order to experience them, you have to let go of your identification with your body and with your mind. Pir Vilayat used to say, "You can't think your way into the heavens, you have to experience the emotion of the angels in order to experience the more subtle planes." So it's a heartfelt attunement.

Those are the four operations involving purification, and there are three others that are most important:

Separatio

What we are separating out is that which is essential from that which is not essential. For example you meditate and you are aware of your thoughts, and in that meditation there are certain thoughts that you realize are not necessary. Thoughts like "this is nonsense" or "is this going to work?", "I guess I should be doing something different", or thoughts about your car or your tax return or something like that, those are non-essential thoughts, at least as far as alchemy is concerned. Essential thoughts might be, "will I find my Creator in me?", "who is the one who loves, is it me, is it the other person, what is love?" Those are more essential thoughts and you get more essential feelings. You get gross feelings like impatience, anger, fear, resentment, and then more sublime feelings, it starts with joy and then becomes beauty, and from beauty the feelings become so sublime you run out of words to describe them.

So in *separatio* we are separating out the grosser aspects of our being from the more subtle aspects. To some extent that is a mental process, it starts in the mind, but then something else takes over, which is your conscience. At first you recognize quite easily the kinds of thoughts that are not helpful or not necessary, and so you learn not to pay attention to them. That's separating the more essential thoughts from the non-essential thoughts. And then sometimes ugly feelings come up in the process, to test you. First you think, "this is how I am, I'm actually a very bad person", and so you feel guilty and ashamed, but then something in you says, "well, this is not who I want to be." And then you will realize, "this is not really who I am." That is *separatio*. We all have the capacity to do this, and we all have the sublime in us.

Mortificatio

It means death. It's similar to the Sufi idea that says *to die before death*. What they mean is to let that sense of self or identity, which you have, die. Your identity means identification with what you call your self, that means your body; that's what limits you. Imagine a magic mirror in front of you, and then you looked into that mirror and you saw yourself as God created you. In other words, you saw your body of light. You'd be quite shocked, because you'd only see a very vague resemblance with what *you* know to be yourself. That's a kind of crisis of identity that we have, you think, "is that really me?" So you go through all kinds of emotions, you feel ashamed, grateful, sad, happy, a whole mixture of feelings. But eventually your attention would be drawn back to this picture of

your true self, it would magnetize you, really attract you, and you'd fall in love with it of course. This is not narcissism, but actually recognizing your true Self.

There is a stage that the Sufis describe when you actually see your soul, so you see who God created you to be. And from that moment it's not possible to be false any more. That's why *mortificatio* is so important, and yet we're so afraid of it. The moment you can't feel the body, you feel scared. All that happened is that your attachment to your physical self has gone.

Similarly sometimes people have experiences on retreat of transcendence; it's very rare, but you can experience that. It's not that you think, but you realize you don't know who you are, you don't know where you are, there is no orientation. What helps you is the realization that **you are in the realms of light**. And so you have gone through a kind of *fanâ*, an experience of death. That's been documented many times over in what is known as the near-death experience. You don't have to fall out of an airplane in order to experience that, you can just do it on retreat. It's quite possible to experience that. So that's a most important operation, but once again, you cannot force it with your mind. You can't use your personal will to push it; the moment you use your will, you reinforce a false sense of self. That's the frustrating thing. You're just about to experience it and it starts to go away. Then you want to hold on to it, and you can't hold on to it. You have to be patient, and, as Pir Zia said, grateful that the experience came close.

Coniunctio

The most important operation in alchemy is *coniunctio*. The English word is conjunction, joining together. It means that the opposites in our nature come together, like the masculine and the feminine in us, spirit and matter in us come together, that which is light and that which is dark in us. All opposites in us come together. Every time a pair of opposites comes together in us, we experience a *coniunctio*. So a marriage, when a man and a woman come together physically, that's *coniunctio*. That's on an external level; and then you are meant to experience it internally.

Coniunctio is the one operation which allows for the possibility of union with God. What it literally means is the **union of your soul consciousness with spirit**. That's what they call the royal alchemical marriage.

Those are the seven operations, and we make use of those in our knowledge of the process of retreat.

Purification by the Elements

Purification by earth: *Coagulatio*

Let's come back to the first one, *coagulatio*. As Pir Zia was saying, the theme for today is **gratefulness**. We experience it first of all through the **earth**, through food, through being supported and sustained in your life. But that is in an earthly sense. Of course *coagulatio* was not meant only to refer to the earthly experience. What it actually means is: that what was in a fluid state solidifies. We think that it's to do with solids and the earth. Well, it includes that, but it's not limited to that. So I give you some examples:

When you learn to meditate, you find your mind wanders; the moment you start to meditate, your skin starts to itch and it wasn't itching before you meditated, and then your knee aches, the back aches, so you struggle with yourself. And then you come to a point where the body gives up trying to catch your attention, and then even your mind stops rebelling, and you suddenly find, without realizing it, that your mind has been still for several minutes. The next step is, you find that not only can you be still in your mind, but it is as though you are in another state of consciousness. In fact **the consciousness feels fluid**.

What's happened is that you've moved from your identification with that which is solid to that which is fluid in yourself. That's what we were doing with Pir Zia this morning, going from the physical to the energy field, which of course is dynamic, fluid in its nature, and then there is a certain point in which you actually start to experience that movement, that sense of flow in you. The moment you experience it, of course it's exciting, and then, even more exciting, you are able to hold on to it. You know how to ride that feeling. Tibetan Buddhists call this *riding the winds of the mind*. It's the first kind of wind, winds are subtle energies. It's that exciting moment like when you're surfing, you suddenly can surf, stay upright and not fall over, the wave carries you. That's why people like meditation, because it gives you that sublime feeling. That is called *coagulatio* also. You have identified and coagulated in your consciousness something more subtle. That which is subtle, to *you* has become substantial. It exists now for you, you actually experienced it. From there on, every time you come across it, you recognize it. It becomes easier and easier to meditate, like your consciousness knows exactly what to look for and how to get there. So that's an example of coagulation.

You can also think of relationships, there are also examples of *coagulatio*. When you're entering into a relationship you wonder if this is the right thing, you think it might be a risk and so you go in and out, and eventually you say yes, I commit myself to the relationship. That's a whole different feeling, it's as though you're in a different kind of consciousness. It's different being in a relationship to being alone. I'm not saying it's better, it's just different. You're experiencing the path of two instead of the path of one. We call it marriage. That is another example of *coagulatio*.

One can go on in the more subtle planes of consciousness, going higher and higher, like a ladder, and each time achieving a state of coagulation with each level. Then it becomes a bit like going upstairs, and then coming downstairs from higher planes, stepping down into life. In each case, going up and coming down, it's *coagulatio*. It's knowing how to get from one step to the other, and then establishing that step.

We can recognize this in dreams. It's possible to use your dreams to get a sense of what operation is happening in you, and also what plane of consciousness you have reached. Sometimes in the dreams, particularly when we are reentering the world, coming back down into the body, *coagulatio* shows itself in our dreams, because we dream of **celebrations**. In those celebrations we eat food and drink wine, it's taking something in, and in the dream there is a physical sense to it. So as you are coming down in your consciousness you are absorbing the grosser and grosser planes. Again one thinks of that theme of gratefulness: as one comes to the end of the retreat process, one is grateful, and so it is appropriate to celebrate with food and wine. So the dream makes sense.

Also one thinks of *coagulatio* in another sense, in terms of knowledge. There is worldly knowledge, which we take in, and there is spiritual knowledge, which you can't take in by reading books or listening to lectures like this. It's something that you discover, it's revealed to you. Sometimes the experience is so sublime that it's not possible to experience it consciously. So sometimes **spiritual knowledge is revealed to us in a dream**, and this is where the operation of *coagulatio* comes in. For example Mohammad spoke about being offered milk to drink, and he said it was spiritual knowledge. And I remember somebody I worked with who had a very profound spiritual experience of the higher planes, and they had

a vision, and in the vision they saw greenery all around, like trees and shrubs and grass. In Sufism green is most important, because it's the color of life, life force. In this vision, this woman was told: "Eat the grass." You know perfectly well, if someone says to you, "eat grass", you'll say, "I'm not a cow." However we do eat variations of grass, corn and so on. But we are not used to the idea, so the mind says, what, eat grass? And then the voice said: "No, eat the grass." So she took it and started to eat it, and she had this experience of *coagulatio*, a state of consciousness went through her as she chewed on it, suddenly she was put into a whole different state of consciousness. So in order to experience this state, she had to assimilate it in some kind of physical way. Of course it was not a physical experience, it was a vision, but it was so real that it felt physical.

And you know, Murshid, when he was a young man, on one of his travels, he met a great spiritual sage, I think it was Mother Krishnabai. He was a fine young musician, but no yet famous, and he wanted to get a chance to play his music in front of the Nizam of Hyderabad. In those days you had to be invited, and to be invited you had to be known, and that was difficult. But something in him knew that was what he needed to do. And he met Mother Krishnabai and she read his thoughts. She took a piece of bread, put it in her mouth, chewed on it, then she took it out of her mouth, gave it to him and said, "eat it." He ate the bread and obviously experienced a kind of change of state of consciousness, because she was a mystic. The next morning he had an invitation to perform his music in front of the Nizam of Hyderabad. And he made such an impression that the Nizam gave him one of his most precious rings, and that's been passed down in the family. Pir Vilayat used to wear it, and it's still in the family. That's *coagulatio*.

Also the famous Sufi woman-saint Rabia said, "I'm doing the work of this world and eating the food of the next world." These are all different ways of describing what sustains us. Sometimes it's spiritual inspiration, sometimes it's spiritual knowledge, sometimes it's a relationship, and sometimes it's food or the comfort of being held that sustains us.

Practice: circular movement of *dhikr*

We shall do a spiritual practice now that goes with this. We speak of the idea of the body that's related to the earth, that's why the *dhikr* is such a wonderful practice, because it combines the body with the mind and the heart and spirit. So we start with the "body" of the *dhikr*. It is just the movement of your head in a circular direction. This circular movement is fundamental in Sufism, the circle or the spiral, because in the spiral form all life form is created. In Western alchemy they say you have to use a mortar to grind down your substance in very fine particles. In the Vedantic tradition, Krishna talks about churning the milk to butter. In all spiritual traditions, the idea of moving in a circle is fundamental, it's what begins to coagulate something. What's being coagulated is that which is sublime.

Let's begin with the circular movement of the head.

You might find that even that short time we spent doing the turning of the head changes your consciousness slightly. It certainly begins to open and broaden your sense of self. In traditional dervish training you do a retreat for 4 years, in which you do your *dhikr* practice the whole day every day, year in year out, and imagine on coming out, turning your head like this becomes normal. I remember in the early days of my retreats, I used to come back and in my sleep, my head would be turning around. If you do it for 18 hours a day, that becomes the norm. It gives you a cosmic sense of yourself, sense of the stars, the planets, which are all manifestations of creation. It enables you to get a much bigger sense of being than just this little self here.

Break.

We carry on with our studies of alchemy. What I didn't mention about *coagulatio* is the color that goes with the earth plane, which Pir Zia described: concentrate on gold and yellow. Yellow is the color of the earth. Murshid described the different elements as having specific colors: **fire is red, air is blue, water is green, earth is yellow**. You might say, this sounds like an arbitrary designation of colors for the elements, but it's based on what one sees. The earth, as you know, has many colors, in some parts it's black, or white (white sand), some parts it's yellow, red, red-orange. Obviously there are different influences in the earth. On the spiritual planes, every plane of consciousness has all four elements in it. Even on the heavenly planes, you still have the four elements, just that the earth is not solid, it *looks* solid. And its color is yellow. One can see the ocean, which has the color green, and you go there and you realize it is just like clouds, it doesn't have the consistency that we know as water. So in this world we find the counterpart of everything that is in the other world.

Purification by water: *Solutio*

Now we move on from *coagulatio* to *solutio*, purification by water. Yesterday we emphasized the quality of fluidity, the idea that in yourself you shift your attitude from being fixed or rigid to allowing yourself to be more flexible and more fluid in nature, but the actual operation is one of **dissolving**. The way we might dissolve is shown in the following example. There was a mureed with Murshid and she had a lot of questions. Because one was allowed only five minutes with the master, one had to think of the most important question to ask in five minutes, to get the maximum answers from the great spiritual master. When she was invited into the oriental room at Fazal Manzil, she sat down in Murshid's presence and she forgot the questions. Why? Imagine for weeks on end she had been thinking about the right questions, the most important questions she wanted to know the answer to. So why did she forget? Because in the presence of a greater consciousness, her consciousness dissolved. In fact she said, "When I first came out and realized I had not asked the questions, I was shocked, and then I realized that what I experienced was actually the answer to all those questions." That's what happens in the operation of *solutio*, when we encounter a consciousness that's greater than our own and we recognize that, then we no longer hold on to our own consciousness, we dissolve. It's a melting of heart, the heart becomes like the ocean and you feel connected to all things.

In the dream state, when people are undergoing a *solutio* operation, they dream of swimming in the sea. Or they have dreams of swimming in a river. Since it is purification by water, one can also dream of washing, being cleansed with water, but it's also the act of washing your consciousness. Like when one experiences the act of forgiveness, related to prayer as repentance, one dissolves into tears. That which was a stain on your character is washed away. But *solutio* can be a much more powerful process than that, like that mureed experience in the presence of Hazrat Inayat Khan. Dissolving so there is no boundary between me and you.

There are other ways to experience *solutio*, for example when we fall in love. They say when you fall in love, you lose all common sense, you lose your head. You experience a dissolving of your attitude, your ideas. I remember counseling a couple, and the woman hated walking and even more so hated mountain climbing. Once she met the boyfriend who was a mountaineer, she started mountain climbing. So in *solutio* your attitudes and prejudices are dissolved. Afterwards when you come out of that stage of falling in love, then you think, "Why should I go mountaineering with you?"

Practice: Tuning in to a great spiritual being

Let's tune in now, to experience this, to a great spiritual being. Get into the consciousness of that being, and then find your own consciousness begins to dissolve. You could tune in to Hazrat Inayat Khan or Pir Vilayat, or any other being that inspires you and you look upon as a great spiritual being. Whether it's male or female doesn't matter. Just tune in; in a first step you see them, and the second step is you become them. What would it be like to be Hazrat Inayat Khan in your own life? What would it feel like?

This is an important Sufi practice, called *Tassawuri Murshid* as the technical term, getting into the consciousness of the teacher. It's very helpful to do on retreat, when you are doing your practices and you think, "I can't do this any more, I'm tired, I can't concentrate", then just imagine your teacher doing the practices, or you can imagine your teacher there and you are doing it together. It's not just a psychological trick, it's a way of tuning in, and if you tune in, you get help.

These are all ways of showing the operation of *solutio*. There are also *wasaiif* that promote this operation. We start with the most basic, *Wahabo*. *Wahabo* means the unfurling of the divine qualities through the heart. The image that's given with the *wasifa* is that of a waterfall, as it descends, it flows from left to right, so from the left of the heart to the right. What it's really symbolizing is the flow of spirit coming down through the crown center, and just past the throat center it turns left, goes down to the physical heart, then comes through the solar plexus and goes out through the right side of the heart. When we say *Wahabo*, we imagine that we are swimming in this stream of consciousness, then actually you let the stream carry you. At that point you dissolve, you feel yourself merging with *Wahabo*.

Practice: Ya Wahabo

Think of it as a river that is flowing through you. You are aware of the energy coming down through the crown center, but you move your head from left to right. It's wonderful to sit down by the riverside and say *Wahabo* as you listen to the river.

Other practices also promote *solutio*, anything to do with *Ishq*. *Ishq* is translated as divine nostalgia, but when one says *Ishq Allah*, one really is expressing the love of God. Also one says *Habib*, the beloved one, *Habib Allah*. So let's say that together: *Ishq Allah – Habib Allah*.

A variation of that is the traditional *Ishq Allah – Mabud Allah*: God is Love, Lover and Beloved. We do this with the head movements of the *dhikr*.

Now we meditate on the act of dissolving our heart. Our whole sense of self dissolves in that feeling of the love of God.

There are other *wasaiif* that promote *solutio*, like *ya Wadud*, *ya Habib*, *Ishq Allah*, they are all watery *wasaiif* that promote dissolving.

What we have covered today, with *coagulatio*, the earth, and *solutio*, water, the *wasaiif* and the whole feeling is more feminine. The other operations we will be working with, *calcinatio* and *sublimatio*, have a more masculine feel to them. That's important to remember as a principle, because you constantly have to keep a balance between the masculine and the feminine when you are working with someone or with yourself. If you get too fiery, then you burn up. If you get too watery, then you remain stuck in the mud, kind of wallow in your own sentimentality. So there is a balance needed between fire and water, air and earth. That's

why we work with these four operations, purifications, and eventually they lead us to experiences of *fanâ*, and then *coniunctio*.

We'll carry on tomorrow. God bless.

Wednesday, 28 July 2004

Light upon light

This morning we will look at an important theme in Sufism, which is *light upon light*. What's meant by that phrase is that the whole of creation was created as a succession of theophanies (theophanies are the descent of the lights, the lights of God). One thinks of in the beginning there was the first light, what the Sufis call *Nur al-Anwar*, and then from that came the archangelic lights, then out of that came the angels, the cherubim and seraphim and so on, and out of those came the souls. Not just human souls, but vegetable souls, mineral souls, animal souls. Some souls descended and came into the realms of the *Djinn* (*Djinn* means the realm of the mind, another word we use is the astral world). And then finally they came into the physical world, the physical world manifested. So it's like a succession of lights.

The light of the sun was the physical manifestation of the higher representations of light. By concentrating on light, one automatically was linked to a chain of lights that lead you all the way back to the *Nur al-Anwar*. Our bodies are part of the light of the sun, but the sun is part of the light of the galaxy, the galaxy is part of the light of the whole universe, and of course there are several universes, and so they are all part of the great light that was the original light before all of creation began. So you have a succession of lights in the physical sense, and the counterpart would be a succession of lights in the more subtle sense. So when we ask that question *who am I?*, what we are asking is to ascend that chain of lights all the way back to our origins.

Now we bring in a second idea, which is **the call and the response**. It's our heart that calls out *where are You?* when we look for God. The call has to be sincere, unless it is sincere, nothing happens. There is a famous Sufi story to illustrate this point, it's the story of an old Sufi who was dying, quite a well-known Sufi, and like all Sufis he had a lot of debts. So as he was dying, all his debtors were around, all wanting their money and very concerned that he might expire. He was quite unconcerned, closing his eyes and smiling. Just then a little boy came by with some *halva* (a sweet). So the old Sufi opened his eyes, called the boy and said, "Ah, let's have some *halva*, food for everyone." So everyone had a piece of *halva*. Then the boy said, "It's time to pay me", and the Sufi said, "I don't have any money." By this time all the greedy debtors had eaten the *halva*, so the boy couldn't take the food back. The boy cried out in despair, "You have cheated me, and now how am I going to pay my boss, I owe him the money!" The Sufi said nothing, just closed his eyes and smiled, and the boy went out, sobbing and crying, worrying about what was going to happen. And the debtors turned toward the old man and said, "Shame on you, how can you cheat a young boy just like that." The Sufi said nothing and carried on smiling. Then all of a sudden, a messenger appeared. He said, "I have a message for you. My master sends something to you." The messenger opened up a box and there was a whole treasure of money, jewels and gold. Then the Sufi opened his eyes and he said, "You see, I had to wait for this, but in order to produce this, the cry of that innocent boy had to be heard by God, so there would be a response."

The story is symbolic, the treasure is not a literal treasure of jewels and gold, it's the treasure that is in our heart. The young boy represents the soul in us that cries out in despair. The debtors of course represent our judgmental side that tends to be materialistic, and the Sufi is the wise one in us that sometimes we do and sometimes we don't have access to. So that's what we mean by the call and the response. Your mind might say: I want to know who I am. And all one gets in response is a kind of echo, like when you hear your voice echoing. That's why we say in English *empty vessels make a lot of noise*. It's the mind that makes a lot of noise. So when the mind calls out, you just get a reflection of the mind. But when the heart calls, it calls because it is already in pain. This is the problem, we have to be really quite desperate to want to experience who we really are and to find God; we have to really deeply desire that. Then there *will* be a response.

To come back now to the first theme, which is *light upon a light*, when the inner worlds are revealed to us in terms of light, there is a succession of experiences. In a way we are sort of laying out a map for you. In the beginning when one goes on retreat, the lights come to you, but in the form of your imagination. As you are doing practices, from time to time pictures come to your mind. These are not visions, these are the workings of imagination. In fact, if you follow those pictures very carefully, you will find they actually do relate to the planes of consciousness, but not always in such an obvious way. What you have to look for is what kind of quality the image carries. For example, when one is encountering the divine power, sometimes you get an image of a bull, which you wouldn't normally think anything of, it doesn't seem to belong to your meditation, but it pops into your mind. Or sometimes you get images of a treasure, like jewellery or gold, and you think, "How materialistic can I be?", but in fact it's to do with a hint of the inner treasure that is in you. So the first stage of these lights is the lights that reveal themselves to you as images in your mind. The images that are given to you will have some meaning to you, they relate to *you*. God speaks to us in our own language, in our own terms. So if you like Chinese mystics, you see Chinese looking angels. God always appears to us in a way that we recognize, and in the language that we know too.

In the next stage, the lights appear to us as different hues or different colors, in a rather undifferentiated way. You have a vague sense that what you are experiencing is like a pale pink-orange light and it feels very beautiful, like third plane, or it could be you experience a lot of orange or red and a lot of burning in yourself, you have a sense of fire, fourth plane. And so on. You experience the planes not in terms of images in your mind, but in terms of the shade of light that is coming through to you.

Then you actually begin to see the landscapes of the different planes. What one finds extraordinary is that the landscapes are very similar to the landscapes we see in this world. And then you realize the truth of the statement *As above, so below*. The higher planes are not different to this world, not different in their form, maybe in their substance they are different.

Then there comes a stage where instead of seeing just the landscapes, you begin to see the light in the landscapes. You begin to recognize the same lights in the landscape that you first saw in the stage before you saw the landscapes. When you come across a pale pink or pink-orange in the landscape, you realize, "this was the third plane that I first saw just in terms of its light, now I'm seeing it in terms of the landscape".

Then another light reveals itself to you in which you see splendor in the landscapes, fifth plane. And so each plane shows the light of splendor of God in it. Then it dawns upon you, what's happening is, you are progressing through the lights and the lights in themselves represent different planes of consciousness. This is quite a complex thing, as you progress from plane to plane you are seeing the light of the plane that you are conscious of in every other plane. In other words, when you are tuned in to splendor, then you are seeing the

whole spiritual hierarchy in terms of splendor, from the angelic world to the astral world to the physical world.

The next step is, you see the lights in terms of their qualities, so you see the qualities in the landscapes. The landscapes become very pure, what we would call sixth plane, very pure, very pale, but you see within the landscapes the different qualities. Some landscapes are full of life force, so one thinks of *Hayy*. Some landscapes, it's not that the word truth is written upon them, but you recognize the light of truth in that landscape. You know you can sometimes go to certain parts of the world, usually the desert, where everything is exposed, and when you walk through it, you have the feeling you can only get through that landscape by being truthful, it completely exposes everything false in you. That's the experience in this physical world, but there is a counterpart in the more subtle worlds, where you see the landscape has a particular light to it. So what you are discovering is the fundamental spiritual archetypes, or *wasaf*, in the landscapes.

Then there comes a stage in which one sees the light of unity in all the landscapes. That's what Pir Vilayat has called the light of intelligence, and then one has the realization, actually what I've been seeing in these landscapes are the landscapes of my being. The landscapes all relate to the chakras. So as each chakra has opened up, it has revealed a different light to you. That's the very quick description of the map; when we say *A light upon a light*, we mean that the light of this world is dependent upon the inner light, which is the light in the astral world, and that's dependent on the light behind that, which is the light of the angelic world, and that's dependent upon the light behind that, which is the light of intelligence.

When we make that call *who am I?* and I really want to see who I am, I want to see my soul, I want to see God; if the heart is sincere, then there is a response, and the response is the presence of the lights, lights that come in succession, one at a time. It's a very reassuring experience, because it is the experience of the unity of all things. And it's more wonderful when one comes back to the world, then you begin to see everything that you saw in your journey in the world, both the dark and the light.

So that's the map. Now what happens in practice? This week is a kind of rehearsal of Sufi teachings, and next week there is an intensive retreat for those of you who wish to come. When we hear about this journey, that's what attracts everyone, we all want to have that journey, want to experience that. But what happens in practice is that yes, when there is a call there is a response, but the initial response is that what you see is yourself in the condition that you are right now. The kind of pictures and images that we are caught up in in life are revealed to us. That's often a little disappointing. So we say to our guide, "Can't I have different *wasaf*, because these ones don't produce the good result." And of course the trouble for the guide is, that is like saying, can I have a different mirror. You can have certain kinds of special mirrors that make you look different, but essentially the picture is still there.

So don't despair when you get the first kind of pictures coming back. It's better to have that than to have nothing. You'd be far more disturbed if you sat in front of a mirror and you saw nothing, you'd say, where am I? It would be a far more disturbing experience. Because even in the defiled image of who we are, there is the presence of God. In fact it's our spirit that appears to us in the form that shows us what we are right now. And so if your character is such that you always play the fool in life, then your guiding spirit, called *Khidr* in Sufism, appears to you as a fool, a clown. He is showing you: This is who you are right now. But remember, don't dismiss the clown, because God is playing the clown. That's the clue: Don't turn away from that, say, well, that's what's happening right now. It's a way of waking you up, so you ask, is this who I want to be? Or if you are very depressed, then the spirit appears to you in a form of somebody who's very depressed. But don't be deceived by the form, because it is you spirit showing you what you are caught up in. This appears in our dreams and also comes as images to us in our meditations.

One of the things the Sufis say that is very helpful on the spiritual path is: *Don't believe what you see*. It sounds a little strange; you will ask, then what's the point of mystical visions? But it is very sound advice, because it says, when you see something that's ugly, don't take it too seriously, don't get depressed about it. Equally if you see something very beautiful and inspiring, don't take that too seriously either, because if you do, you tend to suffer from spiritual inflation. I remember, in the early days of the camp, somebody burst into the tent here, actually it wasn't this tent, while we were having a meeting with Pir Vilayat, and he said, "I have a message from the masters, saints and prophets." He was dressed very flamboyantly, he looked like a dervish, and he was trying to play the role of a dervish. He was suffering from a kind of spiritual inflation. At that moment, when he came in, he looked very impressive and very convincing, shouting with a loud voice: "I have a message from the masters, saints and prophets!" I predict at least half of you would turn around and look at him. Some people would wonder, perhaps this is true? So you can't always believe what you see and hear. And that's very helpful, because it keeps you balanced.

St. John of the Cross experienced the lights, which we call the mystical lights, and then suddenly experienced darkness, and his interpretation was that God was punishing him for a kind of spiritual inflation, thinking that he was so spiritual that all the lights were there, and God was punishing him for this spiritual pride by removing the lights. But in fact, at one point the lights go out and you have to keep your faith until that light, which is a black light, reveals itself as the most brilliant of lights. So don't let your mind interpret what you are experiencing. Your mind is not in a position to judge. Just take the experience as it is. Remember we introduced the idea of *Shahid*, the witness. The witness is detached, you are witnessing your journey. You don't identify yourself with any stage or any experience on your journey. It just is as it is.

There will come a point in which you *will* experience unity with God. In that point your mind will not be involved, but you will know that that is the state of unity. Until one actually experiences that, all other experiences are subject to interpretation. It takes many other experiences to consider the journey again and again, before you recognize the reality of the stages. The first time one goes through that journey, one goes through illusion after illusion after illusion. Each time you have a new experience or reach a new stage, you misinterpret it. Sometimes you misinterpret it in a negative way, in other words you don't realize the value of what's happened to you, and sometimes you misinterpret it in a positive way, you make something out of an experience that doesn't exist. That's why, in Sufism and all the great spiritual traditions, they say: Be aware of the nature of the mind; mind in itself is perfect, there is nothing wrong with it, but it can only be used in certain ways, to be useful. Just like the physical body, it can only take us so far in the spiritual journey; the mind also can only take us so far.

The dhikr of light

So now we can do a practice that starts us out on this journey. This is a practice going back to the Iranian Sufi tradition, the times of Shahabuddin Suhrawardi, who, along with other great Sufis, like Avicenna, introduced that dimension of light into the spiritual Sufi tradition. Sufism has drawn from many strands, you have the breath practices which principally come from the Yogi tradition, the light practices come from the Zoroastrian tradition, and the sound practices come from the time of Mohammad, the *wasaf*, the *dhikr* and all the names that we use. But even there one could say that goes back to Egyptian times, because they understood the value of sound and how sound can affect and awaken the chakras. And other traditions, like Buddhism, have influenced Sufism in terms of meditation, and the Christian

and the Jewish traditions in terms of some of the forms of the *dhikr* and the forms of the prayers. So all that is embedded in these kinds of light practices which involve the *dhikr*. What we are going to do is the *dhikr* of light.

The *dhikr* of light uses two words, first the name *Nur*, the divine light, and when we say the divine light, what we are meaning is that light which has always been and is not subject to decay, it's a non-existential light. That's the light that sustains our life, constantly pouring through us. That's the light that is beyond the light of the soul, and it's your soul that reflects that light in different ways, through the different chakras; in other words, you see the different planes of consciousness through the reflections in the mirror of your soul. The *wasifa* that we use to name that phenomenon is *Munawwir*. So when we say: *ya Nur – ya Munawwir*, that's what we mean: The divine light, *Nur*, is always present, if it wasn't, we would not exist. But our experience of *Nur* is through *Munawwir*. Every time we experience an aspect of the light, we are experiencing an aspect of *Nur*. That leads back to our theme *a light upon a light*.

The form of the *dhikr* is moving your head around, starting at the left shoulder, down, sweeping round to the right, up to the top, that's when we say *ya Nur*, and we use our imagination, which acts as a bridge to the more subtle planes of our being. So imagine a laser light that comes from the third eye, like a laser beam of light that sweeps through our aura. *Ya Nur* is revealing the light to you. And then you bring your head down, so you are descending down into the depth of your being, it's like going down a well. Sufis often use the image of a well, going down it gets darker and darker, till you reach the bottom of the well, that's the base chakra. And then you start to say *Munawwir*, which means the light is reflected through each chakra, all the way up, back to the crown. It comes out at the fontanel and sprays the light all around you. So this is the practice, we will work with it for a few minutes.

Practice: ya Nur – ya Munawwir

Then just silently keeping still and tuning in to the feeling that the practice generates.

Amen. So we take a break now.

Purification by water: *Solutio*

We will pick up the theme now which Pir Zia asked us to concentrate on, which is **repentance and forgiveness**. We have associated this with the water element, purification by water. There are Sufi practices which go very well with this stage. Sometimes images help you to remember them. The water element is more feminine, so you can think of Mother Earth as being forgiving, it's a more feminine-like trait. A *wasifa* that goes with it is *ya Ghafur*, the divine forgiveness, so be aware of your conscience, and also your resentments, and you deal with each one at a time, saying *ya Ghafur*. What you are praying for is the capacity to emerge in you to forgive. People often say: I'd like to forgive, but I can't. My heart is filled with resentment and I don't like it, but try as I might with my mind, I can't get rid of these feelings. That at least is honest. But when you say *ya Ghafur*, then you are praying for that capacity to open up in your heart, to make a space for that person. And remember, what we are forgiving is not the action, but it's the person. Think of the saying of Christ *Father, forgive them*, when he was about to be crucified, *for they know not what they do*. We try to remember that, even if a person consciously did something to us, even in that case, the person actually in a way is unconscious. When we realize that, then we can say: "I do not agree, or I condemn your action, but I can accept you as a human being, I don't condemn

you as a human being. In the past I hated you for the action, and now I can forgive you. It's not the action I forgive, but it's you I forgive." That's the spirit in which we can say *ya Ghafur*.

So let's say it together, and maybe think of one person, or one incident, and it doesn't have to be you forgiving somebody, it could be the other way around, you asking forgiveness. For example, sometimes we get so busy in our lives, or we are so influenced by circumstances, or we are attracted by things in life, that we lose awareness of other people's feelings. That's very human. I've seen people pushing each other out of the way to get a front seat to see Pir Vilayat. In their enthusiasm and their love for the teacher, they are intoxicated, so they lose awareness that they might stamp on someone's foot or push someone out of the way. It's only later, when you see someone else doing that, you think: "How terrible", and then suddenly the memory comes back and you think, "Ah, I used to do that too, or worse, I still do it." But the moment you realize it, then you feel ashamed. So sometimes shame is very important, it can have a positive effect. It's the beginning of conscience when you experience shame. One can also say *ya Ghafur* then, because you are aware of some of your actions.

The Sufis say, the only reason why our hearts are not clear is because of all the shadows or blotches on your heart, dark areas, and that acts as a veil and veils you from seeing reality. The reality of your life, and of life itself. So when we say *ya Ghafur*, it's best to select one thing, so you can focus on the feelings around that issue that are sitting there in you. When we say *ya Ghafur*, we are asking for that capacity to forgive or for forgiveness.

Practice: *ya Ghafur*

We are only touching on the alchemical operations and corresponding *wasaiif*, as this week is more a week of teaching and introducing you to different themes and practices that are involved in spiritual transformation.

Purification by fire: *Calcinatio*

Our next alchemical operation has to do with fire. We don't normally think of fire as purification, it's a very radical form of purification. For example, in certain parts of the world, in a lot of farm land, one burns the land once a year, or every two or three years, in order to cleanse the land. Sometimes we have experiences in life that really burn us. Grief through the loss of a loved one, it empties you out. Christ said *blessed are the poor in spirit*. When a person says, "I feel totally emptied out or devastated", that's what we mean by that. You feel bereft or emptied through the loss of a loved one. If you have ever been involved in such an experience, or if you had the opportunity to counsel someone who has experienced bereavement, you will know that the person who is grieving very often experiences anger. A person asks, "Why did this have to happen?" If it is someone young: "Why did it happen to someone so young?" From a personal viewpoint it seems unjust, and so we feel resentment. Often resentment and anger go side by side with grief. The grief burns you. If you can stay with the process, it may take you a year, two years, you stay with that process of grieving, at the end of it, you are changed. You've been emptied out and your personal stuff has been burned out. What comes into you then is your spirit. It can be a maturing and spiritually growing process.

What we are talking about is the alchemical operation of *calcinatio*, purification by fire. Another example of this could be that you have a serious illness. That illness means that something will change in your life. It can cause a change of your career, cause limitations in

your life. You could be involved in an accident, you wake up in hospital and the doctor says: "Well, you are lucky to be alive, but I'm afraid I have to tell you that you will no longer be able to walk." That's a shock, a sudden realization, something has ended. That's *calcinatio*, a very radical form of purification. The consequence can be negative, of course, you can sink into depression and hopelessness, or you can carry resentment with you, or on the other hand, you can experience anger for a while, and then something begins to change. The fire does its work, purifies you, and then you begin to accept: "Ok, so I don't have my legs any more, so what can I do then?" Something begins to open up in you, a new capacity can develop in you.

Many people who have been diagnosed with cancer or Aids, and they are dying and don't recover, if you speak with people who work with them, very often you see that these people go through a fundamental change in their personality. I remember one nurse who was a student of mine, saying to me: "You know, I've worked in this Aids unit for a number of years, and people who used to come in very often were from the theatrical or film profession, and most of them were quite well known people, so they were used to a lot of attention by audiences, and they were a real pain in the neck, very awkward, very demanding, difficult to work with, very egotistical. However after about six months there, you began to notice a change in them. As they began to accept that they were dying, something profound changed. They eventually became really nice people to be with. It's as though their egotism had been burned out of them."

When you watch yourself and you experience yourself deteriorating, it's hard to hold on to any kind of good image of yourself. The only thing that saves you is when you then get in touch with your spirit, and you realize your spirit can't be touched by this illness. That's what alchemy is about, it's a transformation from that which is more gross, material, to that which is essential. And the nurse said: "And then you would see the light in their eyes." That's another example of *calcinatio*.

Of course I am drawing on more dramatic or exaggerated examples. More ordinary examples are when we are frustrated, like you are waiting to get a place in a course at a university and you have to wait for a couple of years, and you feel angry about having to wait. Actually this is an opportunity to experience purification by fire. Just imagine what kind of person I would be if I could be patient then. In London they say, if you want to experience patience, you have to learn to wait for the bus. In London the buses are always full, and often they are not on time, and sometimes they even change their direction, because the company tells the bus driver to go to another place. So it takes a lot of patience to have faith in that transport system. To someone who does take buses and is angry all the time, shouting at the bus driver or shouting at God about this, you say: "See if you can miss nine buses in a row without getting impatient. Not nine different buses, the same bus nine times around." They will wait for an hour, two hours, and then they will start thinking, "Well, it's alright."

Actually I come from South Africa, over there, when I was young and growing up, the black people had a very different sense of time, maybe not now today, but certainly in those days. I remember once my car broke down, as a young man, I was stuck out in the wilderness where there is absolutely nothing, except a road, and there was a black man, and there was a little post with a sign that said the bus stops there. I had been walking a few miles, I came across this sign and thought, ah, there is a bus stop here. The man wasn't standing up, waiting for the bus, he was sitting down, not on a bench, but sitting on his haunches, the way they sit on their legs. So I said to him: "Excuse me, when does the next bus stop?" and he said, "Oh, maybe today, maybe tomorrow, it comes twice a week." We laugh about that because it seems absurd. But for him it was perfectly normal, there was no hurry, the bus will come when it comes. Of course I didn't stop and wait to find out. That's **patience, the capacity to hold your fire**. It's very difficult. In the Northern hemispheres we are more fiery, we tend to get impatient very quickly, we want things to happen *now*. That tends to be more

a European characteristic, whereas if we learn to harness that fire, instead of it going out towards the world, you learn to contain it, then it transforms itself into light.

Those are different examples of purification by fire, and there are many more. What I'm trying to say is: Alchemy and the spiritual life is not different from retreat. Our ordinary lives constantly have experiences that will help us to transform. You don't have to wait until you get on retreat to transform. Life is filled with experiences all the time that give you the opportunity to transform. Hazrat Inayat Khan said, for the Westerner, he didn't think retreat was the way. He tried to teach a different kind of spirituality, where we meditate in everyday life. So if your *wasifa* is *ya Sabur*, patience, you must practice it in ordinary life.

In the purification by fire, we are working principally with the lower three chakras, and the one the Sufis work on most is the solar plexus. In terms of the aura, the lighter colors are higher up and then as you come down, the colors move more towards red and orange. In order to transcend yourself, you need the help of the energy of the lower chakras. So strangely enough, a person who is very impatient is the one who has a lot of potential, because there is a lot of fire there. It just has to be harnessed. Whereas if a person is easy-going, lazy, then not a lot can happen, because there is not a lot of fire.

Let's work with a practice now. This is a fiery dervish practice. The most powerful *wasifa* that has to do with fire is *Haqq*. *Haqq* means truth, it's a very strong *wasifa*, there is no compromise in it. The fiery people love the sound of *Haqq*, but those people who aren't fiery hate the sound of it. So the ones who love it should keep quiet, the ones who hate it need to say it. It's called the *dhikr* of truth. We say *Haqq Allah ilaha illa 'Ilah Hu*. Let's say it together. – Well, this is a very civilized way of saying it, but not very fiery. So let's do the movements, you move your head around, saying *Haqq Allah ilaha*, head down on *illa*, then up.

Now we want to say it in the consciousness of a dervish.

Practice: *Haqq Allah ilaha illa 'Ilah Hu*

This promotes burning. And as you noticed, it's a very *Jelal*-type practice. *Jelal* means the masculine, its counterpart *Jemal* is feminine. The first two days we were working with the *dhikr* in a more *Jemal* way, today we work with the *dhikr* in a *Jelal* way. Each has their own function and purpose.

Purification by fire not only happens through truth and being burned, but also through humor. Sometimes humor is a wonderful way of transforming a situation, particularly a dangerous or ugly situation. I remember many years ago, we used to have a Centre in a different part of London. We didn't have a lot of money, so it was in a rather poor area, the centre of the drugs trade. You can imagine there were a lot of incidents around us. We used to practice therapy, not only the Sufi evenings, so one day a man was talking very earnestly to a therapist, saying, "I have one very deep fear, I have an irrational fear of police." The therapist was about to say something like, "well, I understand" or so, but the door burst open, and in rushed a policeman, pursuing someone. What had happened, somebody had left our front door slightly ajar and a guy who was on the run from the police tried to run through the house. And he was followed by a policeman. So the two of them rushed through the room, which was on the ground floor, and then out into the garden. Then there was a silence, the therapist and his client were shocked, then both burst into laughter. They couldn't believe it, the synchronicity of it, and that was the man's cure, you see. What more could they say.

[Another police story, about the woman with an equally irrational fear of the police, who was sitting in the retreat hut, dressed all in black and with a black veil, and then scared the young intruder and the policeman following him more than they scared her. Lots of laughter in the tent.]

A funny story, showing that reality is much stranger than fantasy. These things do not happen by coincidence, but actually by desire, called synchronicity. *Calcinatio* is also like that, it comes as a shock to us, like a wake-up call. Sometimes it is deeply shocking, sometimes you see the absurdity of yourself and your situation, and through humor it gets transformed. Joy is related to the fire, you can almost say that anger could be related to joy. It doesn't take much for a person to change from anger to laughter; it's about the **transformation from fire to light**.

Let's take a few minutes to tune in to our heart.
Take a break.

To carry on with our session with *calcinatio*, we looked at the different qualities that come out. One is truth, openness, being direct. Another one is patience, though patience is not really a fire quality, it's an earth quality, about being able to contain your fire. Reminds me of another Sufi story, also about retreat. A rather impatient gentleman, a fiery Irishman, wanted to do retreat, so I suggested to another person in the center to guide him, I selected a guide as an antidote for him, very mild mannered and who wouldn't cause this man to get angry. A very selfless man. The retreat started, and the guide used to go home at night and the retreatant stayed in the hut in the garden at night. After two days the guide was on his way back to see the retreatant, sitting on the bus, one of these moments when everything is fine, you have plenty of time, you think life is good, then a moment of clarity dawns upon you. Suddenly the image came into his mind and he remembered he had locked the man into the hut, in other words the man couldn't go to the toilet. So for a moment he contemplated leaving the bus and going back home, because I was not going to be there, nobody to help him when this Irishman would lash out his anger at him. So the rest of the journey was all the dark night of the soul. He went back to the Centre, which was very brave of him, and he came to the hut, but the hut was quiet. He expected a bomb there waiting to explode, so he opened the latch, silence, then opened the door, still silence, and the man was sitting and meditating. So he came in, sat down, still shaking, the man carried on meditating, so being English, he didn't want to raise the issue, so he pretended everything was fine and sat with him in silence, gave him his practices, and he was just about to leave when the Irishman softly said to him, "You think I could go and have a pee now?" Of course he felt terribly ashamed, terribly sorry and apologized, and the man said, "It's alright, one and a half days ago I was very angry, but then I realized if I got too angry and jumped around, I would pee my pants, so I kept still, and now I feel differently about it." – I embellished the story a bit, but you have the essence of it. That's patience, again the spirit of *Khidr* was working there.

Speaking of *Khidr*, when we are going through that process of purification by fire, the purpose of it is to eventually **reveal the spirit to you**. It's a trial or an ordeal by fire. The Sufis often give this metaphor of being lost in the desert, where there are no signposts, so you can't track your way along from A to B to C, it's just desert. So you need a different kind of intuition to have a sense of where the oasis is, the water, the life. You go through an experience of disorientation and confusion, panic and anger, until eventually you realize, the only way you are going to find the water is to rely on your intuition. Relying on intuition is to rely on the being of *Khidr* to show you the way.

Khidr is known as the green man of the desert. Of course it could also be the green woman of the desert, it's your spirit which appears to you. The green color symbolizes the presence of water, which is life in the desert. That's exactly what's needed, because when you are burning with fire, your throat is dry, and what you need is water. It brings you back to a state of balance. But the thing is, you need to find the inner water, not the outer water. And that

makes sense, because when we are journeying through this kind of trial by fire, a fourth plane experience, then we are tested about the truth in our being. What the test means is to find your true self, so you have to look deep into your heart to find your intuition. That's what guides you to the spirit.

Very often people who are very fiery, their problem is, they don't know just how fiery they are, so they burn people who are close to them with their fire, zeal, fanaticism, enthusiasm, idealism; it's very hard to keep up with an idealist. For the idealist, only the ideal exists, people are just there to help their ideal manifest. Whereas for other kinds of people, relationships are very important, the ideal is not so important. You can see the problems you can have. People who are into relationships are more watery. So the fiery type and the water type need to get together to balance each other out. When the being of *Khidr* appears to us, it's like the inner balancing taking place. We are led to find the missing water in us; when you find it, that is the beginnings of experiencing **compassion**. Compassion is a water quality, and that brings about a state of inner balance, so your drive and your willfulness tend to become softened and tempered by the water, compassion. You begin to develop an inner sensitivity that can feel the things that other people feel too.

You don't lose your fire, but become a nicer fiery person. You don't have so many sharp spikes around you. It's not just a symbolism, but literally the sign of fire is that jagged edge. When you work with people and you say, "Why don't you draw your feelings", and the person who is angry will pick up a red pen and draw a zigzag line, that's a sign of destructive fire. Or people have images of sharp points, like knives or swords, that's also a sign of fire. And if you look at nature, in the desert or semi-desert, the plants are fiery plants, like cactus. You touch a cactus, you get pricked. The watery plants can't live in the desert. Also think of dogs and cats, when they sense danger, the fur on their back stands up, that's like the sign of fire. Actually when you sometimes get angry, you feel as though the fur is standing up on your back. In the dinosaur period, an awful lot of dinosaurs had that shape along the back, a sign of fire. When you see someone's aura and you see that shape in a red color, then watch out. There is a need for water, for compassion, that's the answer to willfulness, egotism, the drive for power, even being driven by sexuality, over-sexualized, people get caught up in that kind of thing, it's a distortion of fire. Of course anger, hatred, any kind of distortion. The answer is compassion, that's what balances the fire. **Together with compassion, the fire becomes wisdom.** The person starts to show signs of wisdom, like they become more patient, more sensitive and understanding of others, and yet they can still retain their idealism and the longing for truthfulness. There is a kind of spiritual law operating there.

Similarly for people who are very watery and more compassionate in nature, they tend to lack fire, and so they become wishy-washy. You ask: "What do you think about this?" They say, "Well, on the one hand I think that, on the other hand I think that", or worse still, they say, "I have no opinion." They need to get a sense of meaning and purpose. You notice that a fiery person tends to be more selfish, like "I know what I want", or "I want that", whereas the more watery person is not sure, could be a little bit of this, or of that. The watery person tends to apparently be more selfless, but it's not quite true; they tend to give way more easily, and in giving way they deny themselves. Only later, when they are on their own, they get angry. They need to develop their fire, so that they can say no. Reminds me of another Sufi story. It's from Pir Vilayat.

Pir Vilayat once was in Pakistan for the United Nations, he was appointed by the UN to work for one of the Government ministers, who was the finance minister at the time. One day the finance minister was in a playful mood. He knew Pir Vilayat was the son of Hazrat Inayat Khan, and he knew they were Sufis. So he said to him, "You know, I was interested in Sufism once." So Pir got very excited, a politician into Sufism? The man said, "Oh yes, I had a Sufi teacher once. In fact he was teaching me the *dhikr*." Pir Vilayat couldn't believe that. So the man explained, "He started to teach me the *dhikr* by telling me the first word, *la*, which

means no, and then he dropped dead. That's why I'm the finance minister, because whenever someone asks me for more money, I learned to say no." – It's a way of illustrating that watery people need to be able to say no. When our driving emotion is compassion, sometimes we need to learn to say no. So once again we see that the fire and water are opposites, what the one has, the other is missing. So when couples come together and the one is fiery and the other is watery, there can be terrible misunderstandings. But if they can develop something of each other's qualities, then it becomes a fantastic relationship.

So now let's start working with some more practices to do with *calcinatio*. We begin with the practice *ya Qadir*. *Qadir* is a very powerful, fiery practice. For a lot of people it's always too much to say *Qadir*, too fiery. So sometimes we moderate the *wasifa* and we give the twin practice of *Qahhar – Qadir*. *Qahhar* means the divine sovereignty, it's also a powerful practice, but it makes *Qadir* a little softer. These are very good practices that strengthen you, give you strength and ability to stand up for yourself so people don't push you around.

Practice: *ya Qahhar – ya Qadir*

If we wish to develop that strength, it's not by simply strengthening our will. So it's not strengthening our ego by saying *ya Qadir, ya Qadir*. What one is doing is invoking the divine power. And the way we do that is through **surrender of our own personal will**. If one feels weak, one may think, "I feel too weak to do this, but by God's will, perhaps I can do it." That way you don't develop that kind of fire in a gross, egotistical way. You are able to do it because somehow it's not you doing it, something is coming through you.

In a time of crisis, people who are normally hidden in the background, who are unknown, suddenly step forward and they do things that nobody expected, they become heroes, heroines, because they didn't think about what they did, something came through them and they acted. That's what we mean by the divine power. Or if someone is trying to push you around, it doesn't have to be the ego that stands up to them, it's just simply the voice of truth. You say no, I will not let you push me around. It's a very quiet way of saying it, but there is a lot of strength behind it. You are not trying to puff yourself up and not feeling authentic about that; if one connects to an inner truth, nothing worldly can persuade you or change your mind. That's why the surrender of one's personal will is so important. *Qadir* is not about an act of will, it's the surrender of your will to the divine will.

Hazrat Inayat Khan once asked a mureed to go and give a lecture in Amsterdam, and this person had never spoken publicly in their life before. So when he asked the person to do it, they said, "Murshid, I can't do this." Murshid said, "When the time comes, you will be able to do it." And this person went away, they didn't argue, and then the time came, and suddenly they felt a power going through them, and they were not self-conscious and were able to give the lecture quite successfully. The reason is, they believed what he said. That's why we must surrender our will, to experience something greater that comes through us. Now this wasn't any kind of psychic trick, like Hazrat Inayat Khan was sort of controlling them like a puppet; all he did was to give them confidence in themselves, believe in themselves and in doing so, they opened up to that power that was already in them. So he helped them to discover the power that was in them.

This leads us to the next practice, which is a fiery practice, to do with faith. If you don't have faith, your fire diminishes. If you have lots of faith, there is an awful lot you can achieve. There is the saying: If you don't believe in yourself, then no one will believe what you say. So that's the first thing; **before you can believe in God, you have to believe in yourself**. That's a very fundamental spiritual lesson, confidence in yourself, faith in yourself. That's why it's so important to be truthful to yourself, because if you are not truthful, how can you believe yourself. And if you can't believe in yourself, then how can you be powerful. So all these qualities are connected to each other.

Very often when somebody is lacking fire, you don't just give them a fiery practice to make them fiery, you need to look a little deeper into the person to see why there is no fire. Sometimes a person lacks fire because they are too compassionate, sometimes a person lacks power because they cannot be truthful, or because they cannot believe in themselves. So the *wasifa* you give addresses not the obvious issue, but the underlying issue. The person who lacks power because they don't believe in themselves, you give them a practice that draws out their faith. There are two *wasaiif* that help us with our faith, although it presumes that we have *some* faith to start with. But if you have some faith, it helps to strengthen your faith. The two *wasaiif* are: *Mu'min*, which really means faith in yourself, and we combine it with *Iman*. In the religion of Islam, the Imam is the one who calls the faithful to prayer. He's like the representative and also the one who gathers the faithful. But it has a more impersonal meaning, which is the faith of God. So *Mu'min* is more impersonal whereas *Iman* is more personal. So you can say: *ya Mu'min – ya Iman*.

Practice: *ya Mu'min – ya Iman*.

We'll take a break now and meet again tomorrow morning.

Thursday, 29 July 2004

Murshid said the Sufi message is an answer to the cry of humanity. Pir Vilayat, his son, often spoke of the call of the dervish. Yesterday we spoke of the call and the response. Today I ask you: *What calls you?* Let's just spend a few moments together in silence, tuning in to what really calls you. How is your soul touched?

The light of splendor

Today I'd like to have us attune to splendor, the light of splendor. The way one does it is first of all through emotion. We start with what calls your soul, because it's your soul that remembers where it came from. Not your mind. It's like having a lucid dream, in which you realize you are dreaming, and the kind of landscape you are in, although you haven't seen it in the world before, is very familiar. So familiar that it brings up a very powerful emotion in you, the kind of emotion when you've been separated from a loved one for thirty years and you meet them again. Your heart leaps with joy, there are tears, joy, a whole lot of emotions come up, that kind of feeling. Also there is that sense of relief that you finally remembered where you came from. That's what we mean by the call of the soul.

Yesterday we talked about light and the beauty of light. Today we talk about the light of splendor, and there is a relationship between the two, just like between the sun and the moon: every time the direct light is reflected, it becomes more beautiful. You can look at the sun as very powerful, overwhelming and strong, but when you look at the light of the sun as reflected in the moon, it becomes very beautiful. Something about the mirror-like quality of the moon enables us to see the beauty of the sun. The moon is very pure, empty in itself. Similarly when we look at a beautiful soul, we say that person is such a beautiful soul: what we see is the light of splendor reflected in that soul. It reflects it in a unique way, a particular way.

When the dervishes see each other, they see the beauty, but they also see what's behind the beauty, which of course is the light of God, splendor. That's what enables them to say *ya Azim*, oh how gloriously God manifests through you. That's the dervish greeting, and that's why they come together to celebrate together. To remember who they are, to remember the light of splendor. So this is a very powerful call. We often try to invoke it through prayer, lighting of candles and incense, we read sacred texts and we chant sacred chants, all in an attempt to remember where we came from, and to be at home, so the soul feels comfortable. When we don't do that, that's when a sense of alienation creeps in. In modern times it's called the existential crisis: Who am I, what am I doing here, what's all this about? Prayer and a sense of sacredness are most important in our everyday life.

The way we get into this attunement, we start with the emotion. That emotion starts by recognizing beauty. That's why Murshid said the first step in Sufi training is to appreciate beauty. That is the first step making that link towards the light of splendor. God speaks to us in many ways, and one of the ways we recognize it is through beauty. Beautiful actions, beautiful words, beauty of form, beauty of being. But what we are interested in is what is behind that, what's the origin of beauty. So let's see if we can use our imagination. For example you stand at the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea, and you can see the light of the rising sun reflected on the sea. It's a brilliant light, a very strong light, as though you were looking directly at the sun. It's almost like a direct light, not only a reflection. This gives us an idea of the light of splendor, but it doesn't give us the experience. It gives us a focal point. Murshid says, do not use the sun itself as an image to concentrate on, it's too powerful. One can concentrate on a partial sun, or light reflected on the water.

Experience: the light of splendor

Let's take a few moments now to get into this concentration. The thing about the light of the subtle spheres is that the things that you see are of course made of light. This landscape or seascape that we are describing doesn't have any kind of solidity to it. It would be as though it was not there as you got closer and closer and to the sea, it is just light. The sea is just a veil, a form to attract your attention. So let yourself be drawn into this light.

It would be as though your feet were not on the ground and you were surrounded by light. The Sufis call it *the light of the spheres*. Each sphere is a being, a being of splendor. You are just experiencing a specific being of splendor, and you are at the center of that being of light. – You experience not only the light of that being, but its atmosphere, consciousness, which is very beautiful. It's almost as if you could smell that being, very fragrant. – In this experience one feels completely safe. – Not only the feeling of purity, but also innocence. – Now see if you can sense the kind of vibration or music that this being would give off. The Sufis call this the music of the spheres, and each being of splendor has its own melody and vibration. – Think of this, the music that this being gives off, or vibration, is a kind of prayer. It's a prayer that invokes the presence of God and fulfils the wishes of God. And it promotes the creation and the well-being of the universe. – Imagine you are on your way home, and you met a being like this in the street, and then another one and another one, by the time you got home, you would be drunk with ecstasy. That's when you will be able to actually do the *wasifa Azim* with some authenticity.

We can begin to do it now, working with two *wasaf* and put them together in the form of the *dhikr*, which we call the **dhikr of splendor**. The *wasaf* we are going to use would be *Azim*, which is the glory, the splendor of God, and *Salam*, divine peace, and *Ikram*, which is not a *wasifa*, but it's the word for splendor. So the string of words would be: *ya Azim – ya Salam – Ikram*. We can do this practice in the form of the *dhikr*, *Azim* would be on the circular movement of the head, *Salam* would be turning within, and *Ikram* is not in the heart, but we

say it in the throat center. That's when you imagine that brilliant light radiating out of the throat center.

Practice: *ya Azim – ya Salam – Ikram.*

Amen. Now we can meditate on this attunement, which is staying with that image of being a being of light, a being of splendor.

One recognizes the light of splendor in the throat center as green, emerald green. When one sees splendor in the landscapes of the soul, it's a mixture of colors, a mixture of **emerald green and purple**. The landscape has those two colors in it. In physical terms, in the world, we see these colors in the peacock. In alchemy they say one of the signs of transformation is the colors of the peacock coming to you, it's a sign of integration of the different opposites in you. That's when we begin to arrive at the consciousness of our being, who we are.

So we take a break now.

Purification by air: *Sublimatio*

This afternoon we want to talk about the air element and the corresponding alchemical operation, which is *sublimatio*. *Sublimatio* means lifting up or transcending, to sublimate; it means that one has the possibility, although there is no guarantee, of a sublime experience. You might remember, when you were very young, having dreams, sometimes actually even as an adult, dreams of going up in a lift, up and up and up, and then sometimes it goes too high and one gets scared, comes out of the lift and jumps down from the building to come down to the earth. At least I used to have dreams like that. What it says is that the soul is not used to being in the world and so it wants to escape. That's not a healthy sign, what one needs to do is to come down back to earth. I remember an experience when I was about eight years old, I was climbing up a mountain and fell off the mountain, quite a long way down, and I am still here because a tree broke my fall. I landed on my bottom. After that time I stopped dreaming of going up and up.

Also we can have experiences of sublimation when we get a bad fright, a bad shock. Sometimes people experience this in a traumatic situation, the trauma is too much for them, they become very confused, it's like the soul withdraws from the world, they lose touch with who they are or where they are. That's a negative experience of *sublimatio*. You can imagine that you can split off or separate out from your body as a reaction to what's going on in life.

We want to use the operation of *sublimatio* to do the opposite, which is not to escape from the world, but to use the experience of to understand ourselves and the world better. So *sublimatio* is not simply a *samadhi* type experience, where you experience the state of nothingness. It involves an ascent in your consciousness, in which you begin to see things from another perspective, each step of the ascent. Actually you ascend through the planes of consciousness, and the surprising thing is, you discover in the Heavens what is here in the world. Not precisely like the world, but you see what the basis of the world really is. It answers the question where all the different things come from, where all the different souls come from. Most importantly, in order to experience such an ascent, you have to do a lot of work on yourself. There are a whole lot of life issues which tie you down to this world. When you resolve these life issues, you become free. That's when you can experience *sublimatio* in a more conscious and a more productive way.

All that you are doing in the experience of *sublimatio* is that your consciousness is moving up, chakra after chakra, all the way up. Much of the time in life we unconsciously move up and down through the chakras. Like when you are supposed to meditate, you fall asleep, the soul goes off to where it is supposed to go, but your mind goes to sleep. Or if you are bored at school, the teacher says, "Where are you?" and you are on fifth plane. I remember a school master saying to me, "Where are you?" and I said, "Somewhere else." He said, "You need to be here", and I said, "But I am here as well." So it's possible to be in two places at the same time. He didn't believe me though.

The Planes of Consciousness

Each plane of consciousness that we encounter relates to a kind of spiritual lesson in life. We will just quickly run through these before we do any practices. It's a way of pointing out that the experience of the planes does relate to life, it's not other than this life, it's part of this life.

The astral (mental) planes

a. The lower astral plane (thought forms)

First of all we think of the planes of the mind, which we go into regularly, particularly in our sleep. Some people call it the astral planes. The astral plane that is closest to this world, we can call it the lower astral, is the plane of concrete thought. You have computer games, virtual reality, so nowadays you have ways of entering into that world through technology. In fact, the internet and computer language illustrates that way of thinking. The higher planes are beginning to incarnate into this world. Some of it is dark, some of it is light. In the lower astral, there are thought forms, and we generate these thought forms by our own thoughts. Of course we experience the thoughts of others too, but unconsciously. For example, you come into a room and there are a lot of bad thoughts in the room, and you pick it up, because you find your mind starting to have negative thoughts and also your feelings start to become negative.

What is the lesson then of this plane? The lesson is to use your **intuition**, because there are some people who pretend to be friendly, but in fact their intentions are negative. You can pick this up when you use your intuition. We use the *wasaiif Sami* and *Basir*. *Sami* is the all-hearing, *Basir* is the all-seeing quality. It's the ability to hear behind what a person is saying and see behind what they are showing you. We call this intuition, or even instinct would be a good way of describing it. Some people may appear to look a little strange, but actually when you use your intuition, you realize this person is ok. It's a spiritual lesson that one needs to learn in life, that you can't always believe what you see, or believe what you hear.

I remember once going for an interview for a job and there were two people there. The one man had a lot to say, asked me a lot of questions, the other man said nothing. After the interview, the man who was talkative said, "Let's go for lunch." So we went to lunch and the other man still was very quiet, so I couldn't contain myself any more, I said, "Well, there's two of you here, what is the other man for?" The talkative one said, "Well, he's got a hundred percent intuition. If he says it's ok, then you get the job. If he says no, then you don't." So I asked him, "What do *you* do then?" He said, "I just get to know you, see if I like you or not." That's the use of intuition. Yes, they did offer me the job, but I didn't take it.

Intuition means not to judge things on the surface, by what they appear to be. The trouble in our life is that there is a constant pressure to make quick judgments right away on something that appears to you. So what I do is, I say, "Well, let me think about it." I go and sleep on it. The next day you have a clearer sense, or a more informed sense of what it is that you have been shown.

Actually the lower astral is not really a plane of consciousness, it's more a plane of thought forms. It is manifesting in our world through our cities. All the huge shopping areas that we are building, you see streams of people going up lifts and down lifts, walking in and walking out, all like robots almost, that's the way it's manifesting.

b. The upper astral plane

The next plane is the upper astral, which is more to do with **inspiration**. The higher mind, that's where our **creativity** comes from. It's where we get ideas from. On retreat, the moment you are able to turn within, it means you get past that lower astral level of the thought forms. Particularly on an individual retreat, you might find that you suddenly get new ideas, you suddenly have an idea about what you want to do, or a workshop you want to create, or a painting you want to make, it's a stage in which we become very creative. This is the level in which we tap into our resourcefulness. Every problem has an answer, but of course you have to ask the right question. The answers are found on this level. Often we are presented with situations which seem to be impossible, without answers. Then we go to sleep and we have a dream, and in the morning we have an idea about what we want to do. This is the level which genius comes from, talents and gifts, like the ability to write poetry or to create music, art, science, philosophy, great teachers, they all get their inspiration from this plane. The lesson here is to be resourceful, creative. If you lead a full life, there are many occasions in which you have to be resourceful and creative, then you draw on that level of your being.

It's difficult really to pigeonhole *wasaiif* into planes, because it doesn't work like that, but there are some *wasaiif* which seem to give more of an attunement to a plane than others. You could say the *wasifa Alim*, which gives us insight. *Alim* can take us further than this, but it also gives us that kind of insight which is seeing solutions to problems. Like somebody tells you their problems, you listen to them very carefully, and when you listen, you see behind what the problems are, you see into their issues. That's insight, *Alim*. *Alim* is also that quality which Buddha is the prime example of, he could see through all the planes in one glance, not just have insight but see all the planes, all the way up to unity.

So those are the mental planes. The chakras that are involved in these two are the solar plexus and the third eye. As you turn within through the solar plexus, you encounter the consciousness of the solar plexus, but you see it through the third eye. You see it in terms of the mind.

The third plane

If one can go beyond the mind, one can reach the angelic planes. We are talking about *sublimatio* now, the ability to transcend, it's through emotional attunement. The prime quality needed is **innocence**. You have to remove all the shadows from your being, so that you become transparent. That's when one becomes very innocent, it's like having no clothes on. You feel naked, exposed, very vulnerable, but you are innocent. This third plane is not only an innocent kind of consciousness, but its prime expression is **beauty**. The way to illustrate it

is, if you walk through the valleys around here, they are beautiful as they are, but if you looked at them through this plane of consciousness, they would look even more beautiful. This is why we have the phrase *the perfection of love, harmony and beauty*, in the invocation. Those words were chosen very deliberately by Murshid, because the perfection of love leads to harmony, the perfection of harmony leads to beauty. When two people are arguing, it's rather ugly, and when there is absence of conflict, it becomes harmonious, and then two people can develop a quality of harmony between the two of them which becomes very beautiful. That's how the three qualities are related to each other.

This is the attunement of the third plane, and the lesson is **unconditional love**, the lesson to experience in life. We are tested in our love. People test your love in infinite numbers of ways, and sometimes we feel irritated, or we become exasperated, sometimes we feel betrayed or abandoned. Each experience has a tendency to break our heart. What it can lead to, if it has a good outcome, is unconditional love. So it is having to learn that lesson of unconditional love. The older you get, the more obvious this lesson becomes. When you are very young, there are a lot of things you can't tolerate, you have very definite opinions about everything. That's because we are idealistic. But as you get more and more experience in life, you begin to realize that actually everyone has a problem, and everyone is really doing the best they can. They get caught up in all kinds of situations and may get lost. Murshid says, *before you judge someone, try to understand what it's like to be them*. That's a wonderful spiritual practice, someone pushes in front of you in a queue, instead of saying, "I was here first", which is what we usually say, or we quietly resent them and send daggers at them, that's when they scratch their head at the back, you say, "I wonder what it's like to be that person. How do they see things?" Then it becomes an endlessly fascinating experience. Of course you can get into it too much and end up at the end of the queue always.

There's a lot of ways in which we can tune in to people. Like if you are sitting in the train and hear people talking, instead of listening to what they are saying, which doesn't make a lot of sense, you actually listen to the sounds they are making. Sound tells you much more about that person and what's happening than the words. It's a very useful exercise. So very often when I'm sitting and listening to someone, I don't often listen to the words, I listen to the sound of the voice. That way it's much easier to feel what they are feeling. That's what Murshid meant when he said, try to get into the skin of that person. Very often you find a person who is aggressive is actually quite frightened inside. Or a person who is selfish somehow feels they don't have enough and are constantly grabbing for more. This can lead to the possibility of unconditional love, you can begin to understand people. It doesn't mean to say that you let people push you around or let them take advantage of you, but you can at least understand why they are the way they are. Then you have a much better chance of being able to relate to them, communicate with them, and that is the art of personality. That is a whole area of teaching in Sufism. It's not just about being polite and sensitive to everyone, but it's also understanding in depth and being sincere. One's personality begins to become very beautiful in that way.

The fourth plane

The next plane is fourth plane, which is the opposite of the third plane. It's to do with **truth**. It's very fiery, very intense. One finds all the distortions that take place in the soul at this level. In the lower astral, one sees the condition of the mind, and the counterpart, the reflection on the soul, is discovered in the fourth plane. So someone who is very deceptive in their mind, then you see the effect on the soul. It actually looks like, not a disease, but strange colors go through the aura. One discovers all manners of distortions, distortions of anger, hatred, truth, sexuality, and so on. So we discover that the heavens are not all light,

there are some heavens in which there is darkness. Of course the darkness is not an absence of light, it's a distortion of light. That's a distinction we should make. There is nothing to be afraid of when people are very dark in their intentions; their light has become distorted, it's not as though they are without any light, but their light needs straightening out.

That's what happens when we go through the fourth plane, we experience all the distortions in our being, all versions of fire, and as you overcome them, there is a transformation from fire into light. That's what leads to **wisdom**. We spoke a few days ago about balancing; when you balance your fire nature, and the quality that's needed is **compassion** to help you do that, then you achieve wisdom. A person who is very egotistical, perhaps very successful, but nevertheless egotistical, begins to experience the impact they are having on everyone around them, they begin to experience regret and then develop the ability to have compassion for people, and so their fire balances out, they become less egotistical. The one who exemplifies this quality of wisdom is Solomon, from the Bible. He was able to resolve the disputes and conflicts between people.

So the fourth plane is the plane in which we experience the transformation from fire into light. It involves your will, your faith, your power, your mastery, and your compassion, and that's what eventually leads to wisdom.

The fifth plane

This morning we attuned to the light of **splendor**: it was very peaceful and gentle. That's a very different attunement, fifth plane and fourth plane. The fourth plane people, they are always doing something, very active people, and it is best to stay clear of them, because they will rope you in, bring you into it. And then when you are burned out, they throw you out again. It happens with a lot of idealists, they attract people, and then people get burned out by them. All the great idealists in this world, if you look at their personal lives, you see that's what happens. They achieve great things, but the people closest to them suffer the most.

Fifth plane souls are lovely people, but they have a tendency to be withdrawn and tend to drop out of life easily. One thinks of the hippie generation, gentle souls, but not very effective. The fifth plane soul is much more interested in retreat and meditation and spirituality, not so interested in accomplishing things and changing the world and building things. So the fourth plane lesson is that of truth, finding the truth of who you are and balancing yourself. The fifth plane lesson is the lesson of **self-image**. Remember this morning's experience: if you are able to get into it, you forget yourself totally. If you have difficulty getting into it, it's because of your self-image. Most of us have great difficulty in believing that we are actually a being of light. Our mind doubts that or puts up a resistance against it. There is a saying, *even the greatest egotist who thinks they are wonderful, is wrong. You are greater still*. You have no idea of the beauty of the treasure that has been invested in your soul. That's why Sufis often talk about treasure, and what they mean is the treasure you discover in your Self, in your soul. That treasure begins with the discovery of the light of the soul, which is the light of splendor.

People who are more attuned to the fifth plane, in order to be in life, they have to find ways of manifesting that quality of splendor, then life becomes more meaningful. **Whatever you do, you should do it splendidly**. That's the trouble in the modern world, everything is done in a hurry. Time is money, everything costs too much or it takes too long. If things don't cost too much and they are quick, then they are desirable. So for the fifth plane soul, this is a turn-off. You feel disenchanting with the world. But if you can find something that is genuine and it's of quality, something that's offering quality and is worth while, then you find you can actually

engage in the world. Then you don't have to be a drop-out and come to meditation camps all the time. There was a time in the 1960ies and 70ies where an awful lot of young people were doing just that, going from camp to camp, and everywhere you went, there were the same people. Very easy-going people, very lovely people, but uninvolved in life.

The sixth plane

The sixth plane is very pure, the quality of **purity**. The experience of it is in terms of pure light, pure vibration, but one feels very detached and uninvolved in life. A sixth plane landscape would be on top of the mountains here, where the snow is, and looking down and seeing the Sufi camp and all the other things going on. It's a place of solitude, you find it in very high altitudes, nothing much grows there, it's very simple, very pure. It has an emotion to it which the Yogis call *vairagya*, which roughly translates out as indifference, but it's not just indifference. It's the kind of feeling where, imagine you wake up in the morning and all around you is snow, nothing but snow and light. And then you look around and you see somebody left a coca cola can. Immediately it feels like a violation of this purity. There is nothing wrong with coca cola, it's just in the wrong place. So you think, it shouldn't be there, everything should be white. That's the kind of feeling, you can't tolerate anything but purity. That's *vairagya*. There are some people like that actually, they are called **perfectionists**. Very difficult people to deal with.

So those are the six planes, the six possible attunements that you can experience through *sublimatio*.

Short experience of the planes

We will now go through some *wasaiif*, kind of a quick tour through the planes, 2 Swiss francs worth. We'll do the more expensive version after the break. But it is possible eventually to experience the planes very quickly, you can kind of just say the *wasaiif* a few times and you can actually feel that vibration. So we will go through some *wasaiif*, just notice which ones you like and which ones you don't like.

Practice: *Ya Sami – ya Basir*

Be quiet for a few moments.

That's the first one, just to see the after effect of the *wasifa* each time. Now we do *Alim*.

Practice: *Ya Alim*

Amen. Just feel the effect.

Now we do the next ones:

Practice: *Ya Nur – ya Jamil*

Just tune into that.

Don't worry about the meaning of the *wasaf*, it's more to get the feeling of it than the meaning.

Practice: *Ya Haqq – ya Rahman*

Notice where each *wasifa* pair affects you in the body.

Practice: *Ya Qahhar – ya Salam*

Now the last pair:

Practice: *Ya Nur – ya Alim*

We will take a break now, and afterwards we will go a little deeper into *sublimatio*.

The Spheres and the Planes

The Spheres of Light

There was a question about the planes of consciousness and are they the same as the spheres of light the Sufis speak about. In fact, this is not an easy question to answer and I don't really like to go into this, because it can be confusing. But basically the spheres are similar to the planes, but they are not the same. It is easier to think of the spheres as spheres of light, they are not so much planes of consciousness as different kinds of lights that we experience as we awaken.

So the spheres are *Nasut*, the earth sphere, the light that we see is the light of the sun, the physical light. Then *Malakut*, which sometimes is translated as the imagination, but actually it's the inner light that one sees of one's mind world, and yet it's the soul that's experiencing the mind world, so it's a mixture of the soul's experience and the mind's experience, it's a bit complex. Then you find *Jabarut*, which is the light of splendor, that *is* the light of the soul. In *Malakut*, the light of the soul reflects after it has acquired a mind, in other words, the influences of the mind are seen in the light of the soul. But in *Jabarut*, it's beyond mind, it's a very high, extremely high attunement, very rare to actually experience, a non-human sphere, purely angelic. *Malakut* is the highest sphere that humans can normally experience. Then there is *Lahut*, which is to do with the light of Intelligence, and then *Hahut*, the light of Unity.

The Planes of Consciousness: Correspondence to the Chakras

The planes are easier to understand, because they relate more directly to the chakras:

- First plane is the earth plane, that's where we are right now, related to the base chakra. The earth plane, the life on earth, also involves all the other chakras; if it didn't, then why would you be a human being.

- The second plane, the astral plane, divided into lower and upper astral, involves the base chakra and the sacrum center; in the upper astral, the higher mind, it even incorporates the solar plexus chakra. So you see there is not an exact correspondence between chakras and planes, it's almost exact, but not completely.
- Then third plane touches on solar plexus and heart center,
- fourth plane also touches on solar plexus and heart,
- fifth plane touches on the throat center, and
- sixth plane is the third eye,
- seventh plane is the crown center.

So that's the correspondence between the chakras and the planes.

The Spheres and the Chakras

Nasut relates to the way we experience the world, which is through the lower three chakras, base, sacrum and solar plexus. *Malakut* opens you up to the heart center as well, but not just the heart center, also solar plexus. Then *Jabarut* is more to do with the throat center. There is another chakra between the throat and the heart, which is called the *wheel of fire*, a very fiery chakra, and that also relates to *Jabarut*. That has to open in order for you to experience the wings of light, you actually experience light coming out of your shoulder blades, like wings. When you experience that, then you remember your angelic nature. Then *Lahut* is to do with the third eye, *Hahut* with the crown.

You can see there is a similarity between the spheres and the planes, but it's not the same. Keep the two separate and don't mix them up. Think of the spheres as to do with the different kinds of light, planes are like a cosmological idea, to do with the levels of consciousness.

The Process of Dying, fanâ, in Relation to the Four Elements

Now a little more talking, and then we can do the practices. It's to do with the process of dying. When we experience *sublimatio*, it's an accelerated process of dying. So when you are in the sixth plane, it's very hard to think. When you are in the earth plane, you are more in touch with your instincts. When you are "in your head", you are in the plane of the mind. I used to work as a scientist and one of the people I worked with was very much into his head, he looked a bit like an out of space creature. His head was quite a bit bigger than his body and the way he walked was sort of disjointed, but he was brilliant. It was difficult to understand him, you asked him a question and you got the knowledge of the universe instead of a simple answer. He couldn't understand why I couldn't understand. So depending on the sphere and the plane we are in, our consciousness is affected, and our body is affected too.

So now we want to go through this process, going from the earth nature to the water nature, to the fire nature, to the air nature. We have looked at the four elements and we have related them to the alchemical operations, we have related them to the different dimensions of prayer. Now we see them in a process, the process of *fanâ*, dying. When you are in your body, you are conscious of your body and not so conscious of the other levels, although they are still operating. We live on all planes at the same time, but we tend to emphasize one more than the others. For example the dervish on retreat is into light, so he is emphasizing those spheres, and the computer scientist is emphasizing the mind, and most people are on the earth plane.

The first consciousness that we need to let go of is the **earth** consciousness. This is where another alchemical operation comes in, which is *separatio*. In order to experience a more subtle sense of self, you have to let go of and separate from that which you are identified with. On retreat, especially individual retreat, you actually lose weight. What's happening is, the earth consciousness is dying. If you look at the Rishis in the Himalayas, they are extremely thin, just enough skin and bones to keep them going. Very little earth consciousness. Not that's a good thing or bad thing, it's just the way it is.

When we experience the death of the earth consciousness, you have an experience like looking at a road on a hot day, and you see the tar on the surface of the road, and you see the air coming up in waves. If you are in the desert, it effects you a little more strongly and you start to see water, like you see a lake in front of you, and when you come to it you realize it's just sand. This is a psychic experience you go through when the consciousness leaves the body, then you actually are in the **water** consciousness.

Then when you start to leave the water consciousness, you start to feel dry. The skin becomes dry, you are a little dehydrated; what's happening is, the **fire** is starting to increase in you. You have to be careful about that, because you need enough of a balance between water and fire, otherwise it corrupts the mind and you start having hallucinations. But when the water nature begins to die, which is the next stage of dying, then one sees something like a candle, a butter lamp. Or sometimes people see smoke, the beginnings of fire.

Then the next stage, if you carry on with retreat, the fire starts to die and you start to get very cold. Not only because the fire is dying, but because you are becoming more and more conscious of **spirit**, the fire has become nothing but spirit. And spirit is very cold; its nature is to descend, a very cold light, whereas the *kundalini* is very hot, it rises. As the fire dies, what you see is little sparks of light in front of your eyes, like fireflies. Then your mind starts to go, it starts to shut down.

This is the actual process of dying too, when people die from this world, they go through these stages. First you can't remember who you are, then you can't remember different aspects of yourself and you begin to lose consciousness of your body, and then everything goes black, like the lights go out, and that's the experience of *fanâ*. One becomes very empty. Of course it goes on after that, it's the experience of transcendence, which does not concern us here at the moment. That's the process of dying and how the four elements are involved. You see very clearly in your experience that you are made of the four elements.

Now we do a meditation on this together. This meditation is a kind of *sublimatio* experience. Talking about the planes of consciousness, what we will be doing is experiencing ourselves withdrawing stage by stage, and as we withdraw, it's a *sublimatio* experience.

Meditation: *fanâ*

We start with the **earth** nature. Let's tune into that in ourselves. You can feel that in the structure of your body, the solid part. The bones are the slowest to change and regenerate in you. They reflect the mineral kingdom. And yet there is something very still about the earth nature in us, very still and very pure. It's a very simple state. – So explore this structure that is giving you a sense of shape that reflects your soul nature. – You have a sense of being fixed in one position, that's the earth. No movement, absolutely still. [long pause]

Now we move to the **water** consciousness. This means tuning in to our fluid nature. The water in our blood stream is the physical equivalent, but it's that feeling of flowing that I'd like you to tune in to, that which is not physical, but the moving, flowing aura all around you. Tune in and feel that flow around you. This is a fundamental step, a very important step in meditation, even if you catch it just briefly. You lose that very still, solid sense, and suddenly you feel like your body is moving, or it is not so solid. This is an experience of dissolving. – The best way to do it is not to engage your mind or your thoughts, but to keep your mind aware of your experience. – It's like a mixture of empty mind and very keen awareness. – This is a very relaxed state, like floating in water. [long pause]

Now we move to the **fire** element. For this we need to become aware of the fire in us, your imagination can imagine heat, constant burning going on in the body, on the cellular level there is constant absorption of nutrients and chemical reactions giving off heat. But the heat, which is fire, also can give off light. The cells begin to give off light, in fact in meditation the cellular structure begins to change and gives off more and more light, as though the body is becoming a body of light. Just imagine the light around you, and maybe if you look down you can see some of the aura is red and orange, you can identify with that. You can either identify with the fire aspect, which is burning or the light aspect, which of course is not burning. – This is another level of your being. – Allow the thoughts to settle down, just experiencing the light and the fire is sufficient. Even for a few moments to experience what it is like to be light is sufficient to give us a memory to hold on to. [long pause]

Now we turn our attention to the **air** in our nature. Physically there are air bubbles in our blood stream, oxygen, there is air in the lungs. But on a psychic level, the air nature is very cold. Now you shift your attention from the heat in your body to that which is cold and cool. One experiences a kind of emptiness. The actual image which is helpful is to imagine being up in space amongst the stars at night. If you prefer, what you could do is first start with a clear blue sky, imagining your body disappearing and there is but clear blue sky, so you are completely porous, there is no physical sense, no water sense, no sense of light, just the blue sky, feels empty, no thoughts. – And then slowly, as time goes along, you notice the clear blue sky becomes less and less light. It goes to that stage where it is in between daylight and night time, the sky gets very empty, loses its color. – It gets darker and darker and one feels the cold more. You identify with the cold as an energy. The coldness and the emptiness. Slowly start to see the light of the stars. Once again you become absolutely still, but now it's not a solid stillness, it's an empty stillness. – We are coming right to the edge of being, the point of no-being. You are still aware of yourself, but it's a different kind of self, very empty, cold, porous, still sense of self. [long pause]

We don't want to stop here, what we want to do is to reawaken a sense of being and the life force in us. We want to **come back to the bodily sense without losing the more subtle senses** that we have experienced. So to do that, we use the practice of the *dhikr*. We start it off very slowly, extremely slowly, so slowly that we don't disturb the state of our meditation. It's like reawakening the different elements in us through the *dhikr*. The first part, *la ilaha*, is the earth, the second part, *illa*, we dissolve, it becomes water, the third part, *'llah*, is the fire which rises, the fourth part is *Hu*, the air. We start off very, very slowly, and then gradually speed up to get more and more into our whole sense of being again.

La ilaha – illa – 'llah – Hu

Amen. Now just be still, spend a few moments quietly experiencing the attunement. The attunement is a mixture of body, mind, soul, and spirit. No one part is separated from the other.

Take a break now for today, we'll meet again tomorrow morning. God bless.

Friday, 30 July 2004

Inspiration (sublimatio): The dhikr of the Broom

The theme for today is inspiration through prayer. Perhaps it might be an idea to work with a spiritual practice that goes along with that, because inspiration always leads to transcendence. In alchemy we refer to this as *sublimatio*. This is a breath practice that involves all the chakras and it works with the spirit. When the spirit awakens, it awakens the chakras. We work with a particular principle, that each chakra illuminates the chakra below it. Secondly, the more gently you breathe, the more subtle is your breath; whereas the faster you breathe, the more gross is your breath. You don't have to artificially slow down your breathing, just breathe a very gentle, subtle breath. In that way we are getting in sync with what the Tibetans call the winds. They don't distinguish between wind and light, they are the same thing. So there are winds across your face, from the left temple to the right temple, and then there are winds across the shoulder blades at the back, one feels winds around the heart and the low abdomen, the upper thighs and around the ankles. When the different chakras awaken, you experience these winds, it's like a draft that's blowing across you. That is why we breathe very slowly, because our breath is slowly harmonizing with the winds.

So let us breathe quietly for a few moments. We begin by practicing the *fikr* of the breath, being aware of the breath and letting your consciousness expand in the breath. This is a fundamental practice that you should always do before you do any *wasifa* or *dhikr* practice, or before any other breath practice, or even before any prayer.

In the *dhikr of the broom*, we make use of the direction of the breath, which is going to follow the pathway of awakening through the body. It's not a simple straight line from top to bottom, it meanders through the body. We are going to work on the most important centers of awakening, and also with the most important aspect of the *dhikr*, which is *Allah Hu*. It's really working with vibration of sound and with the breath.

First of all we focus on the base chakra, which the Sufis call *Qalab*. The Sufis use a different word with a slightly different meaning for the chakra, it means a subtle center or *latifa*. So focus on the base, just breathe in and out through it. – On the next in-breath, you silently say *Allah* as you breathe in through the base. Then you draw the breath up all the way to the crown center, you identify with the spirit that's coming through the crown center, and as you breathe out, you silently say *Hu*, and *Hu* descends right down to the base chakra.

Practice: In-breath *Allah*, rising – out-breath *Hu*, descending

You don't hold the breath after breathing in or out, it's just a smooth, rhythmic flow of breathing. – Then focus on the base center, seeing its beautiful **red** light radiating out around your aura around the bottom of your body.

We now move up to the next center, called the *latifa nafsia* by the Sufis. You can focus around the lower abdomen area. As you breathe in, you silently say *Allah*, and as you breathe out, you silently say *Hu*. We do that quietly. – At the same time you also visualize the **red-orange** light of the *Nafs* going out into your aura, particularly directing that orange light down towards the *Qalab*, the base center.

And we move to the left side of the heart, the left breast. As you say *Allah* and you breathe in, you imagine that side opening. On the out-breath you say *Hu* and experience the spirit revivifying that center, giving it life force. – Now you direct the light of that center, which connects to the center *Qalb*, which we normally call the solar plexus, down to the *Nafs* center, the *latifa nafsiya*. It's an **orange** light that you direct down to the *Nafs* whilst you are still saying silently *Allah – Hu*.

Now we move horizontally across the heart to the right breast. Again we focus on saying *Allah* on the in-breath, opening the right side, and then on *Hu*, spirit awakens and energizes the right side of the heart. This is the *Ruh* center, *latifa ruhiya*, the second stage of entering into the *Sirr*, or *latifa sirriya*, the heart center. – The light is a **golden** light, and you visualize this golden light being radiated out and directed back towards the *Qalb* on the left side of the heart. So the light of the *Ruh* awakens the *Qalb*.

Now we move to the center of the heart, this is the last stage of awakening of the *Sirr*, the secret of the heart. It's in the center of the breast. Once again one says *Allah* silently on the in-breath, *Hu* on the out-breath, the spirit awakening that center of the breast. – For the color, this time you can visualize **emerald green** in the center of the heart. Imagine this light pervading your whole being, all around you, as you are saying *Allah – Hu*.

We move to the next center, we skip the throat center and go straight to the third eye center, which the Sufis call *latifa khafiya*. You start by saying *Allah* and drawing the breath in through the third eye center, and then *Hu* on the out-breath, the spirit enters the third eye and awakens it. When you start saying *Allah*, you focus your two physical eyes on the tip of your nose, breathe in, then you move your physical eyes up to the bridge of the nose and then up, as you carry on saying *Allah*, to the third eye position. On *Hu* simply experience the spirit going through the third eye. – Now we direct the light of the third eye down, through the throat center, down to the heart center, the *Sirr* in the center of the breast. You direct the light that is awakened in the third eye center downwards, and it's a **purple** light.

Then we move up to the crown center. Again one imagines that the fontanel can open up as we say *Allah*. This is where we have access to the spirit in its purest form; the opening of the crown center corresponds to the experience the Buddhists call the void. It's the beginning of what the Sufis call *fanâ*, the beginnings of dying. We open that center as we silently say *Allah* on the in-breath, and then *Hu* on the out-breath, the light of pure spirit causing this fontanel of light to radiate the light all around you. – Then we direct the light of the crown center down to the third eye center, all the while still saying *Allah – Hu*. This is a pure, **white** light, awakening the third eye.

Now take your own time to descend to the chakras in turns as we have worked with them, all the while saying *Allah – Hu*. It simply means going down to the third eye, saying *Allah – Hu*, then down to the heart center, and so on.

Now we do the *dhikr*. On *la ilaha*, you do the circle from left to right, aware of the light in the different chakras, then you lift your head and become aware of the crown center light and the third eye light. Then you descend on *illa*, but what you do is you imagine the light of the crown center descending, all the way down to the base chakra. It's like the two lights meet, the light of the crown chakra and the light of the base chakra. Then you lift your head and bring it up to the heart center at the center of the breast, saying *'llah*. It is very important you concentrate on the green light, radiating out all around you. And then instead of lifting your head to say *Hu*, you keep your head straight and just imagine *Hu* going through the heart. The spirit comes through the heart.

Let's do this slowly, we have a few minutes left.

Practice: *la ilaha – illa – 'Ilah – Hu*

Amen.

Take a break now.

Integrating all the Different Experiences

It's the time now in our week together where we need to integrate all the different experiences. It's the time for the process to be enriched by bringing them all together. Each day we focused on a different theme, a different element. You may find yourself responding to one particular practice more than others, or one particular talk or one attunement more than others, because that is your nature. But we are living in a time in the world where everything is starting to come together, we have less and less opportunity to separate ourselves, we are mixing and communicating more. From a spiritual perspective, things are being integrated more. It's not enough for example to be a Sannyasin, one has to be a Sannyasin in life. It's not enough to be successful in the world, one also has to find a sense of purpose. And so here it's not enough to resonate with one particular way of working, it's important to also learn something from all the different methods that we present to you. That's what results in balance. By balance I don't mean to say that we all become the same, that would be very boring, but a balance in yourself. What we are really talking about is the fifth element, which is **ether**. Ether combines all the other elements in a balanced way. At least we can attempt to balance them.

The Different Soul Natures

One has to also take into account the fact that all our soul natures are different. Murshid speaks about this, he says that there are natures that are more inclined towards devotion and religion, and there are some souls that are inclined more towards the world and the business of the world, some are more philosophically inclined and some are more socially inclined, their sense of purpose comes through service; and some souls are mystically inclined. He doesn't say which one is the best, he just says those are the different souls. However it's important to come to appreciate the role of each soul nature. You see, not everyone is interested in retreat, and neither is everyone interested in the business of the world. It's important that there be some kind of exchange between the two.

When one works on the spiritual path with people, you need to be able to understand the differences in peoples' natures. The ways in which souls express themselves are different, as I described through the different professions, and then the personalities of the souls are different too, according to the elements. Fiery people need to be inspired, watery people need to be related to, earthy people need to feel safe and they want you to be practical, and the air personalities like lots and lots of ideas. Somehow we have to integrate all these different natures in ourselves, so you can find that part in yourself.

Earth Nature

We have looked at the earth nature and the importance of the earth nature. Let's take a few moments to remember that. We said this was related to the operation of *coagulatio*, that it's

important on the spiritual path to take time to assimilate things. That's a slow process, time to take things in, to digest them, to absorb them, whether it's a spiritual lesson or a spiritual practice or a spiritual attunement. You need to be prepared to spend time to really feel at home with it and integrate it fully in yourself, to the extent that it becomes part of you physically. That means that in attunement to **peacefulness**, you want to absorb it in such a way that your body somehow reflects that peacefulness. If there is a tension in your body, or a restlessness, you can't fully absorb that quality of peacefulness. That's what we mean by *coagulatio*, let the attunement, or the practice, or the teaching be coagulated even in the body, not just the mind.

The teaching that helps us around this is thinking of the qualities of the earth nature. As Pir Zia yesterday suggested, we start with the quality of **gratefulness**, gratitude for what we are receiving, whether it's a teaching or an attunement or a spiritual practice, a lesson that you are having to learn, or a new abode or accommodation that you moved into, and maybe it doesn't quite suit you, but that's what you are given at the time.

For example, there is a wonderful lesson I experienced once after a retreat. I was a little spaced out and I came to the airport and missed my plane. I was too early for my plane, I was actually three days early. [laughter] The man at the counter said, "You are the first person that's come three days early", and being a good planner, I arranged everything that I had no money left and no resources. So I wondered, I didn't want to stay in the airport for three days, so I left the airport and started to walk. It was an airport in the countryside, so I walked into the countryside, and when I was far enough away, I found a good spot and sat down and put up my tent and sat in the tent for three days. It was that quality of accepting, that's my position, that's my home, no food and just to be quiet and still. It was a wonderful, saintly quality that one develops through the earth, the ability to be quiet, to be patient and still. To accept your situation without complaining and to appreciate it. It was a wonderful three days, just experiencing that state to be able to be contained in that small space. It was not a traumatic experience, like panic, running around, trying to borrow money or trying to get a different flight etc.

Another example is, once I went on retreat, it was the start of the retreat and the retreat guide didn't show up, for two days. This was at the Abode, in America. So I was sitting there on the mountain, waiting, and again it was accepting, this is the way it is. Of course, when they arrived, they were very sorry. But that way you develop a strength and power, **power through stillness**. People are drawn to you because they can feel that stillness. It feels very safe, and that's a quality of the earth. If you treat your experiences, things that you learn, your attunements, in that way, you will coagulate those things. That's part of the purpose of life.

In modern tourism, people go through five cities in five days; not much is coagulated. It's like the other extreme. If you lead a life in that way, what are you going to take with you, in terms of your experience? The physical body is here for us to inhabit, because it affords us the opportunity to experience God in a particular way. Whilst it's true that we become intoxicated by the body or trapped in the body and therefore forget our sense of self, at the same time, once you overcome that kind of illusion of the body, you come to see the body really is a spiritual temple and it's a privilege to have a body, even if your body is far from perfect. There are billions of souls queuing up to come to the world, believe it or not. We are the lucky ones, so it's a tremendous privilege to be alive in the world, because you have a unique opportunity that will not come again to experience God in this way.

Every aspect of the body has its importance and its spiritual meaning and purpose. And all the emotions too, even hatred, anger, they all are important experiences. In Sufism one talks about certain *wasaiif* we don't often practice, like the Wrathful one; who wants to develop that quality? But what is meant by that, you first experience wrathfulness when someone has

made you very angry. The point of view that you are coming from is your ego. But the divine wrath is not to do with your ego, it is to do with a kind of outrage about how people quite deliberately torture people or commit murder or even things like disgracing your spiritual heritage. There is a kind of wrathfulness one experiences in oneself. One uses that energy to put things right. In other words, that quality, that *wasifa*, when it is in service of God, becomes a divine quality. It's a way of saying all the qualities are important, and also all experiences are important, eating, going to the toilet, they all have a significance and are important experiences. In Buddhism they say making a cup of tea should be a spiritual experience. We think that's just something ordinary, it's not important. Every moment is important, that's what we mean by living in the body, living through the body. It's an opportunity to experience not only the physical world and the instinctual world, but to experience the angelic together with the instinctual. That's a unique, rich experience, to have a body and have physical needs as well as be an angel.

So that's what we take with us, we take with us experiences that we have coagulated. You don't take anything physical with you, but you take the experience with you, and Murshid says that's what enriches the heavens. The heavens are constantly being created, they are being created by our experiences.

Water Nature

Now the water element. We said that the essence of that was fluidity, and we linked that to the prayer about **repentance**, the quality of **forgiveness**. This is an important element to incorporate in ourselves, because it gives us a capacity to flow with life, to understand the different kinds of people. Even if you don't find yourself fully appreciative of all kinds of people, but you can understand them. It's important, if you live in this world, to experience all the different kinds of landscapes. If for example you grew up in the desert, and you never left the desert, you'd know the desert very well, but what of the sea? And what of the mountains, the snow? What of the green grasses and the forests? You would not know anything about that. So when you left this world, you'd suddenly realize what you had missed and you would be very sad.

The water element is important, because water spreads everywhere. You can learn to blend with different people, different landscapes, then you have come to know that aspect of God. The opposite of this is rigidity, where you stay just in *your* place, you have your point of view, your community, and nothing else. It's a rather brittle existence. There can be strength in fluidity, and you don't have to lose yourself. In fact, it's not possible to lose yourself. You can become unconscious for a while, but you cannot lose yourself. The water element gives us that ability to absorb different languages, different cultures, different environments, different teachings, and it's the most important element when it comes to relationships and relating. Why do we have relationships? They help us to learn about ourselves and about God. *Every face is a face of God*, so that face mirrors back something of ourselves to us, and also we see something of the other in our partner. This becomes an enriching experience.

The water element also prepares us for fire, which is next, in the ability to surrender. In the alchemical process, there is a continual interchange between the experience of struggling, where you have to use your will, like you have to show up for the day, you have to do your practices, practice concentration, and at the same time one has to be prepared to surrender, realize that you come to a point when you can do no more, you are exhausted or you have lost the will to struggle. So it's a constant interchange between those two, and that's how you progress. If you just sit back and let it all happen, nothing happens. But you can't do everything with your will either. **Sometimes you need to surrender and sometimes you**

really need to struggle. In a way it's very similar to the interplay between fire and water. The understanding of that interplay and the understanding of the need to balance the two is crucial in alchemy. There mustn't be too much fire, because then it dries up all the water, and there mustn't be too much water, because then it puts out the fire.

Fire Nature

Now we talk about fire, remembering fire was related to *calcinatio*. This is to do with the ability to **transform fire into light**. The fire element is important, because it is to do with awakening, even when you kind of surrender and dissolve, *olutio*, suddenly within yourself the spirit starts to stir, and that's the beginning of fire. In alchemy they say, you must give fire to fire; the fire needs fire in order to sustain itself. Once you find for example a practice that's working for you, or an attunement, don't stop! You must continue with it. Or if you work with a spiritual practice like the *dhikr*, very typically, it's very difficult to give in to it quickly, it takes time. And so one needs the fire of persistence, keep trying until you eventually break through. That's what Buddha demonstrated, remember he sat under the Bodhi Tree and said: I'm not going to move from here until I experience enlightenment. That's fire. A lot of people give up too quickly, that's why they don't succeed. **The two greatest qualities in this life are patience and persistence.** All great things are accomplished through patience and persistence, including appreciating the *dhikr*. Because when it does open up, it is a very great experience. An experience that nothing in the world can match. It's not of this world. But to experience it through the body is a very wonderful experience. So that's the fire nature.

Air Nature

The air nature is to do with transcending, it is the opposite of fixed. The air nature gives you the ability to see things as they are. That's what we mean by *sublimatio*, you can have a spiritual experience or maybe struggle for a spiritual experience. I remember struggling and struggling on retreat and feeling very depressed, and then as time went along I reflected on it from a distance in time. Then I realized that the way I was interpreting it was mistaken. I suddenly began to realize that what I had been looking for was already there. That's what we call **insight**, *sublimatio*; given a distance from one's involvement, one suddenly sees things. It's important in life, when you are involved in conflict with people, you sometimes need a bit of distance to look and see when you are not so emotionally involved, what's going on. Most particularly on the spiritual path, the moment you take up the spiritual path you are inviting strong experiences in your life. You get so caught up in them and your will want to control them and you can't, that's when one needs to stand back and get a distance from it. That's what we call *sublimatio*, and it's making use of the air element.

The people who really have a strong air nature, the problem for them is the opposite, they are afraid to get involved, they are always at a distance. So they have to be called into life.

Ether Nature

Each element has its own strength and its own weaknesses. But imagine when you put all these elements together in yourself, in balance, then you are what might be called the

cosmic human being. I use those two words quite deliberately, because human suggests the more limited side and cosmic suggests the unlimited. That really is the ether nature.

The *dhikr* of Self-Acceptance

Let's do a spiritual practice together. It's called the *dhikr* of self-acceptance. What that means is, it recognizes the spiritual dilemma we put ourselves into when we are drawn to spiritual experiences, because on the one hand we are inspired by them, on the other hand when we are trying to put them into practice, we fail. Particularly in the beginning, we swing from being inspired by an experience, and then when we try to continue with it, we fail and we become depressed. And then you feel bad about yourself. There is a term that should go into the psychological dictionary, it's called *spiritual inadequacy*. It's becoming increasingly common as more and more people take up the spiritual path, they are inspired by what they see and experience, and then when they fail they swing to the opposite and they feel spiritually inadequate. You see, both experiences are an illusion, both your sense of elation when you experience something spiritual and also when you fail to experience something spiritual and you are depressed, both are an illusion.

I remember a very strong lesson I learned from my Sufi teacher. One day I had the experience of the opening of the heart chakra, which was for me a mind-blowing experience. I wanted to speak to him about it and tell him all about it. And he said, "Oh yes, that's the heart chakra, yes." And he didn't say anything more. I was most disappointed, a bit cross that apparently he didn't appreciate how important it was; it took many, many years to realize that it's just an experience. The mind always wants to know, what does it mean. What the mind is really saying is, "This is great. I'm really getting somewhere." So you have to be careful about that. And equally so when one feels one has failed spiritually or was unable to achieve something, then you think "I failed, I'm no good", that's as mistaken as the other case. This is why we need to do a *dhikr* like this, because it addresses those two extremes. It's a bit like manic depression, in mania one becomes crazy and in depression you become inert, you can't move, it's two extremes. You want to find a balance which integrates both, so each one moderates the other.

One can still say the words of the *dhikr*, but actually you don't need to say the words, it's optional. What's important is, when you say *la*, you go down to the lower self, the limited self. That's when you remember all your inadequacies, limitations, all the bad things about yourself. It's important to accept them, you see, rather than pretend they are not there, or now I am spiritual they don't exist. It's much more spiritual to tolerate they do exist. It doesn't mean to say you are a bad person because they exist. So that's on *la*. Then you lift your head up, *ilaha*, and now you are conscious of the highest in you, which is also real. Remember we did the meditation on splendor, that's when we experience the spiritual treasure God has invested in us. That is unlimited. You know the saying: We don't realize how small we are and we don't realize how great we are, it's both. So that's the great part; now you have the two opposites and you want to bring them together.

The limitation in us needs to be transformed, rescued, by the highest in us, and the highest in us needs to develop compassion for our limitations. That's what stops the destructive self-criticism.

The two sides need each other, they need to be a couple. The highest needs to incarnate through limitation and the limitation needs to be transfigured so that it can realize its potential. They meet in the solar plexus, on *illa*. Then we say *'llah*, moving up to the heart. The heart is always a transformer, so that's where they get transformed and synthesized.

That's the point of self-acceptance. Then one can say *Hu* through the heart. So let's do that together.

Practice: *dhikr* without words

The *dhikr* is an integrating practice, whereas *wasaf* are not. Remember as a principle, the *dhikr* brings about greater balance in us than any particular *wasifa*. The *wasifa* can bring you into balance because you needed that particular quality. **The *dhikr* involves the body, the mind, soul and spirit**, it's a complete spiritual practice. And finally, remember the Sufi path is the path of the heart and self-realization and mastery and so on, illumination, but also, don't forget, it's the path of the human being. What that means is, it's the path in which you become a full human being. A lot of people forget that on the spiritual path, they eschew humanness as being a failure. But a greater sense of spirituality can be realized through being human.

Balancing the Opposites

I need to say one or two more things about balancing the opposites, the marriage of opposites. The contrast of ordinariness of life versus the extraordinariness of life: we get so used to our ordinary lives that we don't realize the potential of our ordinariness. We think of our lives as dull and boring and we fantasize about being extraordinary. Or we seek extraordinary experiences, or we seek what we think are extraordinary people who can tell us about extraordinary experiences. The first thing to know is that you already are extraordinary. The more I get to know people, the more I realize people are quite extraordinary. What you need to focus on is the ordinariness of life, like keep your life simple and pay attention to the moment. If you constantly think about all the extraordinary things you'd like to be, you miss the moment. The idea of the moment is most important; **when you are fully present to the moment, everything that is extraordinary opens up to you**. But when you seek out extraordinary experiences, then mostly what happens is you experience ordinariness. The promises of things never live up to themselves.

The ancient Sufis had a wonderful way of simply expressing what I am trying to say to you. They say, *if you look for God in the world, what you find is yourself; if you look inside of yourself, then you find God*. That's what we mean when we say, pay attention in the moment, be as conscious as you can in every moment, even when you are doing ordinary things, because it becomes a continual meditation. Whether it's walking, sitting on the toilet, whether it's eating, it's a continual meditation. Ideally it's no different from prayer then.

In fact, my first very extraordinary spiritual experience began in a toilet. It's not the kind of place you would associate with spiritual experiences. I even first met my spiritual teacher in the toilet. It was Pir Vilayat, and he said to me, "A lot of people don't brush their teeth." He saw me brush my teeth and he said, "It's terrible, that bad breath." He was telling me this while we were both peeing together. And then about a week later, it was in that same toilet my heartbeat started to go very fast, like 200 beats per minute. I thought I was having a heart attack, which was an illusion, so in panic I rushed out, I found I couldn't walk properly, and my wife was there and I couldn't talk properly. Then suddenly I realized it was a heart opening, and it became a very powerful spiritual experience. So what I am saying is, sometimes things happen when you least expect them, and you don't always find what you are looking for in the place you expect to find it.

Two Kinds of Spiritual Experiences

This is leading into the more serious side of what I want to say today, which is the difference between two kinds of spiritual experiences. One kind of experience is called *hal*. *Hal* means a state, a state of consciousness that comes over you spontaneously. You have nothing to do with it, you can't prepare for it, you can't predict when it will come, it just happens. That experience is a gift, a spiritual gift of God. And I want to add: if you have not had such an experience, it doesn't mean to say that God is withholding gifts from you, because you are not spiritual enough or not good enough. The state of *hal* comes across a certain kind of temperament. That's why I talked about the different soul temperaments. It tends to come across people who have a more mystical temperament. Whereas other people, who have different temperaments, who are just as spiritual, sometimes even more spiritual, very rarely experience such things. So do not judge a person's spirituality by the kinds of spiritual states they experience. Spirituality is more assessed by the way you treat people and the way you relate to people, and the way you handle your life. Often people get confused, when somebody has a psychic or mystical temperament, and they have extraordinary experiences, and people look to them as though they are great spiritual teachers or highly evolved beings, which is not necessarily so.

A way of illustrating this is to retell a story that Murshid tells. He was one day traveling by train in India and there was another man in the same compartment, just the two of them. They began talking and the other man was telling him he was a doctor and where he came from. It turned out this man came from the same state as Murshid's teacher, who was Abu Hashim Madani, a great spiritual teacher. Then Murshid asked him, "Whereabouts in this state are you living?" and it turned out they lived in the same town. So Murshid became curious and he thought, he must really know of my teacher, so he said, "What street do you live on?" It turned out they lived on the same street. Then he couldn't contain himself, he asked, "What number of the house?" It turned out the two were neighbors. Then Murshid said, "Do you know this man?" and he said, "Oh yes, my next door neighbor." So Murshid said, "Well, what do you think of him?" He said, "Oh, just another neighbor." Murshid was shocked. Two things he realized. One was that the average person does not see what there is to be seen. The other thing is that ordinariness and extraordinariness can go hand in hand. **There is no value in making a show of spirituality.**

It's quite a common theme in Sufism that the great dervish is somebody you wouldn't recognize as a dervish. You have no idea. Just remember that, when you are going through all these places like Zurich and Cologne etc., who knows, great spiritual beings might be passing by every day. But don't look for them, because people think you are very strange if you are looking for the real dervish. Extraordinariness is often veiled. It's an important spiritual teaching not to make a show of your spiritual experiences, but to concentrate on making your ordinary life a full life.

So we said that one kind of spiritual experience, *hal*, is a state of grace. The other kind of spiritual experience is not a gift, it is earned, you work for it. You do your spiritual practices, you learn your lessons in life, and eventually you slowly progress. Something opens up in you, or you open up to a certain spiritual station, and that's called a *maqam*, a spiritual station. *Maqams* are not gifts, you have to work for them. Everyone can progress from *maqam* to *maqam*, but one should remember the progress is slow and you never know how long it's going to take or what you have to do to get to the next *maqam*. But the thing about the *maqam* or spiritual station is that it's stable. Once you have achieved that state, you remain in that state. Whereas the **experience of a *hal* is temporary**. It comes suddenly and it goes suddenly, you can't hold on to it. Neither can you reproduce it, however much you try.

I think there is a relationship between the two. In my experience it is as following: We are often given a spiritual experience as a way of waking us up. Sometimes it's when you are very young, sometimes middle age, sometimes in old age, but what these experiences have in common is that when you had that experience and it goes, you don't get it back again. But it acts as a kind of wake-up call in which you begin to search spiritually. What you are searching for is how to get that experience back again, and that's what leads to progress towards the next *maqam*. Eventually you will reach a spiritual station or *maqam* in which you will remember that original experience. But when you reached it this time, then it remains, or it's always accessible for you.

That's the difference between the two experiences and also their relationship. It can take many years to achieve that. In my own case, it took over 10 years of searching and working to re-experience what I originally experienced. It can take longer; it is not important how long it takes. Also it's not important if you don't have an experience of *hal*. What is important is to begin to recognize who you are, come to appreciate what your spiritual nature is. People whose nature is more religious will find fulfillment through religious expression. But that is not a measure of their spirituality. What *is* a measure of their spirituality is what kind of human being they are becoming. It could be a businessman or businesswoman, and that's your path, so it's there you will find your spiritual expression. Murshid speaks of a time when he met the great American industrialist Henry Ford and they spent some time together. And he came away saying, Henry Ford actually doesn't realize it, but he is a mystic. He has realized some things that the mystics take many years to realize. Not that he had had mystical experiences. What we mean is to say that each person's path is different and you mustn't base your own spiritual self-estimation on measuring yourself against other people's spiritual experiences. What is far more important is the meaningfulness of your life and how happy you are in yourself. That is what one needs to focus on, listen to the heart and work with your heart, because your heart can be the guide. **And when the mind knows what the heart wants, the mind can think of a way to achieve it.**

The *dhikr* of Love

To end this week, we can now work with a Sufi practice. Perhaps we can sing it together. This is the *dhikr* of love: *Ishq Allah – Mabud Allah, God is Love, Lover and Beloved*. The way we do this practice is to sing from the heart. Not so much remembering the notes in your head, but feeling the nostalgia or longing for God in your heart, which is the same longing as you experience in your everyday life when you are unhappy or dissatisfied. Let's chant together from that feeling.

Chanting: *Ishq Allah – Mabud Lillah*

Let's complete our session with the expression of *Ishq Allah* through the *dhikr*.

Practice: *dhikr Ishq Allah – Mabud Allah*

This was our last meeting in this group for the week. We'll meet tomorrow morning in the big group. I want to say thank you for your attention and participation. God bless you all.

Transcription and titles by Ursina Fried-Turnes