

# The Sufi Meditation of the Heart

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*True knowledge of God is gained when  
the lover comes in contact with the Beloved  
through secret communion with Him.*

- Traditional Sufi saying

## HISTORY

Sufism is a path of love. The Sufi is a traveler on the path of love, a wayfarer journeying back to God through the mysteries of the heart. For the Sufi the relationship to God is that of lover and Beloved, and Sufis are also known as lovers of God. The journey to God takes place within the heart, and for centuries Sufis have been traveling deep within themselves, into the secret chamber of the heart where lover and Beloved share the ecstasy of union.

Sufism is the ancient wisdom of the heart. It is not limited by time or place or form. It always was and it always will be. There have always been lovers of God, long before they were known as Sufis. There is a story about a group of mystics, a band of lovers of God, who were called the Kamal Posh. Kamal Posh means blanket wearers, for their only possession was a blanket which they wore as a covering during the day and used as a blanket at night. As the story goes they traveled throughout the ancient world from prophet to prophet but no one could satisfy them. Every prophet told them to do this or to do that, and this did not satisfy them. Then one day, at the time of Muhammad, the Prophet was seated together with his companions when he said that in a certain number of days the men of the Kamal Posh would be coming. So it happened that in that number of days this group of Kamal Posh came to the prophet Muhammad. And when they were with him, he said nothing, but the Kamal Posh were completely satisfied. Why were they satisfied? Because he created love in their hearts, and when love is created, what dissatisfaction can there be?

The Kamal Posh recognized that Muhammad knew the mysteries of the heart. They stayed with the Prophet and were assimilated into Islam. According to this story the Kamal Posh became the mystical element of Islam. And later these wayfarers became known as Sufis, perhaps in reference to the white woolen blanket, *sûf*, which they wore, or as an indication of their purity of heart, *safâ*, for they were also known as the pure of heart. Over the centuries Sufism spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond, with most Sufis being strict followers of Islam, though some were persecuted by the Islamic orthodoxy.

In the early days of Sufism very little was written down; there were just luminaries, saints, friends of God, *wali*, who lived their own spiritual passion, their deepest devotion. One such saint was Râbi'a, a woman who was born in the eighth century into slavery, but whose owner was so impressed by the intensity of her devotion that he gave her her freedom. She became known for stressing the love that exists between the mystic and God. Always looking towards God, she cared for nothing that might distract from or interfere with this relationship. She was once asked, "Do you love

God?" "Yes," she replied. "Do you hate the devil?" "No, my love of God gives me no time to hate the devil."

Like many early Sufis, Râbi'a practiced severe renunciation and austerities. The great ninth-century saint Bâyezîd Bistâmî also practiced severe mortification, but he stressed that the real renunciation was of the lower self:

I shed my self (*nafs*) as a snake sheds its skin, then I looked at myself and behold! I am He.

Through the subjugation of the lower self, or ego, the lover realizes his essential unity with the Beloved. Bâyezîd expressed his experience of unity with intoxicated utterances that could be considered heretical:

Praise be to Me, how great is My majesty!

Bâyezîd Bistâmî was known as belonging to the school of intoxication, as was the tenth-century mystic al-Hallâj, who passionately exclaimed the oneness of lover and Beloved:

I have become the One I love, and the One I love has become me!  
We are two spirits infused in a (single) body.

Al-Hallâj's seemingly blasphemous statements, including the famous "*anâ'l-Haqq*" (I am the Absolute Truth), cost him his life on the gallows of Baghdad. But through his death he became immortalized as the prince of lovers, as the one who was prepared to pay the ultimate price for love, his own blood. In contrast to these intoxicated Sufis, al-Junayd of Baghdad advocated the state of sobriety. Junayd stressed the state of *fanâ*, the annihilation of the ego, and unlike al-Hallâj, whom he supposedly rejected from his circle as a madman, Junayd felt that it was dangerous to speak openly of mystical experiences.

The early Sufi mystics lived their mystical passion. Their teaching was their life and although their sayings were collected by their followers there was no mystical doctrine. But by the twelfth century Sufi teachings began to be organized into a mystical system. In 1165 one of the greatest exponents of metaphysical doctrine, Ibn 'Arabî, was born in Spain.

The core of Ibn 'Arabî's mystical teaching is expressed by the term *wahdat al-wujûd*, unity of being. Ibn 'Arabî replaced the idea of a personal God with a philosophical concept of Oneness. Only God exists. He is the One underlying the many and is also the many. He is the cause of everything, the essence of everything, and the substance of everything:

He is now as He was. He is the One without oneness and the Single without singleness.... He is the very existence of the First and the very existence of the Last, and the very existence of the Outward and the very existence of the Inward. So there is no first nor last, nor outward nor inward, except Him, without these becoming Him or His becoming them.... By Himself He sees Himself, and by Himself He knows Himself. None sees Him other than He, and none perceives Him other than He. His

veil, that is phenomenal existence, is a part of His oneness.... There is no other and there is no existence other than He.

Because there is no other than He, through knowing ourself we come to know God. "He who knows himself knows his Lord." This is not a philosophical concept but a mystical experience: "When the mystery-of realizing that the mystic is one with the Divine-is revealed to you, you will understand that you are no other than God and that you have continued and will continue.... When you know yourself, your "I-ness" vanishes and you know that you and God are one and the same." *Fanâ* , the loss of one's "I-ness," is a state of realizing one's essential oneness with God. Nothing becomes God or even unites with God because everything is He.

The greatness of Ibn 'Arabî is not in the originality of his ideas. The theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*, unity of being, was already part of Sufi metaphysics. But Ibn 'Arabî formally organized ideas that until then had only been expressed orally. Later Sufis valued the work of "the greatest *sheikh*" for systematizing what they regarded as the real essence of Sufism.

While Ibn 'Arabî became known as "the pole of knowledge," Jalâluddîn Rûmî came to be known for some of the world's greatest writings on mystical love. Four years after Ibn 'Arabî's death in 1240, Rûmî, a theology professor, was walking home from school when he met a ragged dervish, Shamsi Tabrîz. According to one story Rûmî fell at Shams' feet and renounced his religious teaching when the dervish recited these verses from Sanâ'î's Diwân:

If knowledge does not liberate the self from the self  
then ignorance is better than such knowledge.

Shamsi Tabrîz was the spark that ignited the fire of divine love within Rûmî, who summed up his life in the two lines:

And the result is not more than these three words:  
I burnt, and burnt, and burnt.

Shams had awakened in him a fire that could only be satisfied with union, with the ecstatic loss of the self in the presence of the Beloved. Shams was the divine sun that lighted Rûmî's life. But one day Shams disappeared, possibly murdered by one of Rûmî's sons who was jealous of his father's intense love for the wandering dervish. Without Shams, Rûmî was consumed with grief, lost alone in the ocean of love.

But from the terrible pain of outer separation and loss was born an inner union as he found his beloved within his own heart. Inwardly united with Shams, the theology professor was transformed into love's poet. Rûmî knew the pain of love and the deepest purpose of this fire within the heart, how it empties the human being and fills him with the wine of love:

Love is here like the blood in my veins and skin  
He has annihilated me and filled me only with Him  
His fire has penetrated all the atoms of my body  
Of "me" only my name remains; the rest is Him.

Rûmî became the poet of lovers, expressing the crazy passion of the soul's desire for God. Rûmî's words, spoken centuries ago, ring in the soul of every lover, every wayfarer who seeks to follow this passion that is in the innermost core of our being, the pathway in the soul that leads back to the Beloved. His major work, the *Mathnawi*, became known as "The Qur'an in Persian." And today he is the world's most popular poet, which speaks of the need we have to hear these stories of divine love, to hear from a master of love how the heart can sing, cry, and burn with passion for God.

Rûmî is known not only as a poet but also as the founder of the Mevlevî order. While the work of Ibn 'Arabî, Rûmî, and others established a literature for Sufism, the founding of the different Sufi orders, or *tariqas*, was an important development in the practical application of Sufi teachings.

By the eleventh century the small groups that gathered around a particular teacher had begun to form into *tariqas*, each one bearing the name of its initiator. The essence of each order is the tradition transmitted from teacher to disciple in an uninterrupted chain of transmission. Different orders can be distinguished by the basic practices and principles which they inherit from their founder. Sufism, which has been defined as "Truth without form," has at its core the mystical love of God. But it also developed according to the need of the time and the place and the people, and different *tariqas* reflect different facets of mystical love.

For example, the first order to emerge was the Qâdiriyah, founded by 'Abdu'l-Qâdir Gilânî (d. 1166) in Baghdad. 'Abdu'l-Qâdir was an ascetic, missionary, and preacher who became one of the most popular saints in the Islamic world, and his tomb in Baghdad is a place of pilgrimage. The followers of this order believed in both the *dhikr khafî*, the silent repetition of the names of God, and the *dhikr jalî*, the vocal repetition of His names, and emphasised the realization of moral qualities, like charity. At about the same time, the Rifâ'iyya order was founded by Ahmad ar-Rifâ'î (d. 1182) and spread from Iraq through Egypt and Syria. Until the fifteenth century it was one of the most popular orders. The Rifâ'iyya dervishes were known as the Howling Dervishes because they practiced a loud dhikr. Rûmî's Mevlevî order became known as Whirling Dervishes on account of their mystical dancing to the sound of the reed flute and drums.

In contrast to the Mevlevi are the silence and stillness associated with the Naqshbandiyya, named after Bahâ ad-dîn Naqshband (d. 1390), but started by 'Abd'l-Khâliq Ghijduwânî (d. 1220). The Naqshbandis are also known as the Silent Sufis because they practice a silent rather than vocal *dhikr*. They do not engage in *samac*, sacred music or dance. They value of psychological work and dream interpretation along with their spiritual practices, and emphasize the *suhbat*, the close relationship of master and disciple. The order was very successful in Central Asia, and spread throughout India due to the work of Ahmad Sirhindî (d. 1624), who was also known as the *Mujaddid* (the renewer).

The Indian branch of the Naqshbandi order became known as the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya. This Sufi order was brought to the West in 1967 by Irina Tweedie, author of *Daughter of Fire, Diary of a Spiritual Training by a Sufi Master*. After the death of her husband, when she was in her fifties, she had gone to India where she met a Sufi master, Bhai Sahib. Bhai Sahib means elder brother, because traditionally

the Sufi sheikh is "without a face, without a name." Sufis do not believe in personality worship, or in idealizing the teacher. The teacher is just a guide, a stepping stone from the world of illusion to the world of reality. Bhai Sahib trained her according to his system, and she was the first Western woman to be given this ancient spiritual training of the Naqshbandis.

She stayed with him for a number of years, undergoing an intense spiritual training, which she recorded as a diary. When she met him he told her to keep a diary of her experiences, and to keep a record of her dreams. Later he said, "I am not going to teach you anything. If I teach you things you will forget them. Instead I will give you experiences." Sufism is a path of experiences, in which the very inner substance of the individual is totally changed. Later, her diaries became a book, *Daughter of Fire* (*Chasm of Fire* in its abridged version), the first written record of this spiritual training. It tells of how love is created within the heart, how this divine love is experienced as burning longing, and of the slow and painful process of purification that grinds down the ego until the disciple surrenders totally to the Beloved, to the currents of love that take her Home.

## THE MEDITATION OF THE HEART

The two central practices of the Naqshbandi path are the silent *dhikr* and the silent meditation of the heart. Repeating His name, we bring the remembrance of the heart into consciousness and connect our everyday life with the eternal moment of the soul. Whatever our outer situation, the heart can hear the name of its Beloved and our whole being becomes attuned to love. But in our everyday life we are still confronted by the veils of illusion, by the maya of His beautiful world. Only when we close our outer eyes can we turn our whole attention to the Beloved. There is a story about Râbi'a, sitting in a darkened room in meditation on a beautiful spring day. Her servant called to her to come out and see what the Creator had made. From within her room Râbi'a replied, "Why not come in and see the Creator? Contemplation of the Creator so preoccupies me that I do not care to look upon His creation."

In meditation we learn to still the mind and the senses so that we can directly experience the inner reality of the heart. One friend had a dream that gave her a glimpse of the sweetness beyond the mind:

I am sitting with the group and the teacher silently speaks to me, saying, "I will show you what this meditation can offer you." The group begins to meditate and when I fall into meditation I hear the sound of the most beautiful chord of music whose notes become louder and whose vibration fills my whole being until its essence absorbs me in an intense sweetness and bliss which I can only describe as a glimpse of heaven. The notes cease as the meditation ends.

Such bliss is the substance of the Self which cannot be experienced on the level of the mind. The mind is known as the "slayer of the Real," for it separates us from spiritual Truth which is found within the heart. While the mind understands through duality, the differentiation of subject and object, Truth is always a state of oneness: the knower and the knowledge are one, the lover and Beloved are united. Meditation is a

technique to take us from the world of duality to the oneness within the heart. Muhâsibî, a ninth-century Sufi from Baghdad, stresses its importance:

Meditation is the chief possession of the mystic, that whereby the sincere and the God-fearing make progress on the journey to God.

Different Sufi paths use different meditation techniques. One practice developed by the Naqshbandi order uses the energy of love to go beyond the mind. Love, "the essence of the divine essence," is the most powerful force in creation. Coming from the dimension of the Self, love has a faster vibration than the mind and it has the ability to overcome the mind. We taste this in the experience of "falling in love" when we find that we cannot think clearly or rationally. When we give ourselves in love to the Beloved this experience is amplified many times, which is why Sufis are often referred to as "idiots of God." In the words of 'Attâr, "When love comes reason disappears. Reason cannot live with the folly of love; love has nothing to do with human reason."

Rather than attempting to still one's thoughts by focusing on the mind, through focusing on the heart and the feeling of love within the heart one leaves the mind behind. Thought-forms slowly die and our emotions are also stilled. The "meditation of the heart" is a practice that drowns the mind and the emotions in love's ocean.

For the heart meditation, as long as the body is relaxed the physical position does not matter: one can sit or even lie down.

The first stage in this meditation is to evoke the feeling of love, which activates the heart chakra. This can be done in a number of ways, the simplest of which is to think of someone whom we love. This can be God, the great Beloved. But often at the beginning God is an idea rather than a living reality within the heart, and it is easier to think of a person whom we love, a lover, a friend.

Love has many different qualities. For some the feeling of love is a warmth, or a sweetness, a softness or tenderness, while for others it has a feeling of peace, tranquillity or silence. Love can also come as a pain, a heartache, a sense of loss. However love comes to us we immerse ourselves in this feeling; we place all of ourselves in the love within the heart.

When we have evoked this feeling of love, thoughts will come, intrude into our mind—what we did the day before, what we have to do tomorrow. Memories float by, images appear before the mind's eye. We have to imagine that we are getting hold of every thought, every image and feeling, and drowning it, merging it into the feeling of love.

Every feeling, especially the feeling of love, is much more dynamic than the thinking process, so if one does this practice well, with the utmost concentration, all thoughts will disappear. Nothing will remain. The mind will be empty.

This meditation is practiced both individually and at group meetings. In a group meeting the energy of love is increased by all those participating, the stronger inwardly helping those less experienced. A few hearts longing for God magnifies the power of love present at the meeting many times.

Individually this meditation should initially be practiced for at least half an hour a day. Early morning is usually the best time as there are fewer thought-forms in the air and we are not saturated by the activities of the day. Meditating before falling asleep is also a good practice. But this meditation is not a rigidly prescribed discipline-it should not be forced. As in all Sufi practices if there is too much effort it is not spiritual. And sometimes one is unexpectedly drawn into meditation. The heart, awakened from within, calls one. Then if possible one turns away from outer activities and sits in silence for a few minutes or even hours, called by love into the innermost chamber of the heart.

In time we make the meditation our own; we find the time that suits our schedule and inner nature. There are also different ways to initially evoke love and still the mind. While some practitioners just instinctively awaken the love within their heart, others may begin by thinking of their teacher, or placing themselves in his presence. Others begin by saying the *dhikr*, repeating *Allâh* a few times, in order to inwardly align themselves with the currents of love.

Usually we just let the thoughts come and go as we focus on the love. Fighting or arguing with the mind just gives it more energy: the mind enjoys a good argument. But there are also times when we need to use our will power to stop the mind, to cut its incessant chatter and never-ending discussions. However, the mind does not like to be controlled, to lose its power and autonomy, and will often fight back, creating the thoughts that it knows will most fully engage us, trying to distract us from our focus on love. It is best to just let love do its work, to allow its power to conquer the mind.

Surrendering the mind in the heart, we offer to the Beloved our own individual consciousness, that spark of His Divine Consciousness which is His gift to humanity. So many wonders and so many evils have been enacted with His gift of consciousness. But to make the journey back to God we need to return this gift, this source of our illusion of self-autonomy. Each time we go into meditation we sacrifice our individual consciousness on the altar of love. In so doing we give space for Him to reveal Himself:

Go you, sweep out the dwelling-room of your heart, prepare it to be the abode and home of the Beloved: when you go out He will come in. Within you, when you are free from self, He will show His Beauty.

Emptying the mind, we create an inner space where we can become aware of the presence of the Beloved. He is always here but the mind, the emotions, and the outer world veil us from Him. He is the silent emptiness, and in order to experience Him we need to become silent. In meditation we give ourselves back to Him, returning from the world of forms to the limitless ocean of love within the heart.

#### BASIC EXPERIENCES: INNER SILENCE AND CATCHING THE HINT

The lover longs to go far beyond the mind and the ego, to be absorbed in love's limitless ocean. Drowning the mind within the heart, we wait to be taken, to be absorbed in love's emptiness. However, this complete giving of oneself takes time,

patience, and practice. The initial stages of meditation are often the work of stilling the mind and the emotions, creating an empty space where we can be attentive to love and listen to the voice of our Beloved.

He reveals Himself to those who love Him, and it is always an act of grace. The work of the lover is to be waiting, always listening for His call. "Catching the divine hint" is an important Sufi practice in which we learn to be continually attentive to our Beloved in order to serve Him. But only too easily does the clamor of the world deafen us and the noise of our own mind distract us. In order to hear the guidance that comes from within, we need to attune ourselves to the frequency of the heart and be sensitive to the still, small voice of the Self. We need to learn to focus our attention on the inner world and cultivate stillness. Shiblî tells a story of going to see the Sufi master, Nûrî, and seeing him sitting in meditation so motionless that not even one hair moved. He asked Nûrî, "From whom did you learn such deep meditation?" Nûrî replied, "I learned it from a cat waiting by a mouse hole. The cat was much stiller than I."

Within the silence of the heart, the attention of the lover is receptive, waiting for the Beloved. Meditation is a state of receptivity which is a container of communion with God. Later the lover learns to carry this state of inner attention at all times, always keeping an inner ear attentive to the voice of the Beloved, always receptive to His hint. But in the early stages of the path it can be difficult to hear His voice when we are engaged in the activities of our outer life. We need the sacred space of meditation to withdraw into silence and keep our attention focused on the heart. Meditation also attunes us to the higher frequency of the divine hint, for the hint from God is "faster than lightening." Through the continual practice of meditation, the mind is purified and disciplined, made more accessible to the voice of the Beloved.

At the beginning we have to learn the art of listening, the art of being inwardly present, attentive and empty. We have to learn to be silent, because listening is born from silence, and only in silence can we catch the voice of our Beloved. We can also learn to ask, to seek guidance for ourselves or others. Immersed in the silence of the heart we can speak more directly to the source, ask without the distortions and disturbances of everyday consciousness. And in this silence, surrendered to the emptiness, we are receptive to any answer that may be given. Often we sit in meditation and even when we ask there is neither guidance nor hint; we remain alone in the empty space of our listening. But the listening of the heart is always an act of love, a coming together, even when nothing is heard. Listening is a wisdom so easily overlooked, because it is feminine, receptive, hidden, and our culture values only what is visible. But Rûmî knew how central a part it plays in our loving, in our wordless relationship with our Beloved:

Make everything in you an ear, each atom of your being, and you will hear at every moment what the Source is whispering to you, just to you and for you, without any need for my words or anyone else's. You are—we all are—the beloved of the Beloved, and in every moment, in every event of your life, the Beloved is whispering to you exactly what you need to hear and know. Who can ever explain this miracle? It simply is. Listen and you will discover it every passing moment. Listen, and your whole life will become a conversation in thought and act between you and Him, directly, wordlessly, now and always.



Through our meditation we learn the art of being silent, receptive, empty, and attentive. We learn to listen with the inner ear of the heart which is attuned to the voice of our Beloved. Surrendering the mind in meditation, we also learn to give ourselves to a reality that is not limited by reason, and this helps us to unconditionally follow the divine hint. Immersed in love, the mind becomes more malleable, less crystallized, and learns to accept a higher authority that does not follow its laws of logic. Meditation floods the mind with light and love, changing its texture, making it more accessible to the wisdom and guidance that come from a dimension of oneness.

The lover is the servant of the Beloved, and it is within the heart that He makes known His needs. When the ego and mind have become subservient to love, we are able to be attentive to Him whom we love. In being attentive to the heart we are able to fulfill the deepest purpose of our being, to "be here for Him."

There was a ruler who had a servant for whom he cared more than his other servants; none of them was more valuable or more handsome than this one. The ruler was asked about this, so he wanted to make clear to them the superiority of this servant over others in service. One day he was riding with his entourage. In the distance was a snow-capped mountain. The ruler looked at that snow and bowed his head. The servant galloped off on his horse. The people did not know why he galloped off. In a short time he came back with some snow, and the ruler asked him, "How did you know I wanted snow?"

The servant replied, "Because you looked at it, and the look of the sultan comes only with firm intention."

So the ruler said, "I accord him special favor and honor, because for every person there is an occupation, and his occupation is observing my glances and watching my states of being attentively."

Meditation prepares us for the work of servanthood. It attunes us to the higher frequency of His hint, and takes us into the inner chamber of the heart where lover and Beloved commune. Meditation helps us to live in His presence and follow His will.

#### FURTHER STATES: *DHYANA* AND *SAMADHI*

The regular practice of meditation prepares a place for the lover and Beloved to meet. Within the heart the lover and Beloved are always united, but in order to realize this the ego and mind have to be drowned in love. The ego's world of separation is dissolved in the currents of love that are activated through the meditation of the heart. Technically the act of focusing on the feeling of love within the heart activates the heart chakra, the psychic center which experiences and generates love. The heart chakra begins to spin, which generates more love, which further helps to still the mind. As the mind becomes more still the heart spins faster, which, like a chain reaction, further stills the mind. Eventually love completely overwhelms the mind. This is the first stage of *dhyana*, the complete abstraction of the senses.

The experience of *dhyana* rarely happens during the first practice of meditation. It may take months, even a few years to reach this stage. Then when we initially experience *dhyana* it is usually for a split second, and the mind does not even know it was absent. For an instant the mind dips into the infinite and there is little or no conscious awareness of what has happened. Just for a moment we were not present. Gradually the mind goes for longer periods, which can seem like sleep, because this is the nearest equivalent we have ever known to this mindless state. But it is not sleep, and if one is observant one sees that coming out of *dhyana* has a different quality from awaking from sleep. There can be a sense of being, or a clarity different from the "fuzziness" of sleep. Or we emerge with a sweetness within the heart, a softness, a tenderness, or deepened feeling of longing. Sometimes it can seem that one is gradually returning as if from a great distance. In fact during the state of *dhyana* the individual mind is thrown into the universal mind. One is merged into the source.

But the mind does not take easily to this loss of control. Often it fights back, generating all manner of thoughts. It also can also evoke fear, patterns of anxiety, even panic. For most of our life the mind has been dominant, and now it is losing its control. Sometimes, just before it is about to dip into the state of *dhyana*, the mind, confronted by an experience in which it does not exist, becomes frightened. It may pull us back from the brink, catch us again in the grip of its self-generating thoughts. But through perseverance the energy of love triumphs, and gradually the mind becomes used to this transition, and surrenders to its own non-existence.

*Dhyana* is the first stage in the meditation of the heart. There are different levels of *dhyana* as the lover is immersed deeper and deeper into a reality beyond the mind. More and more one feels the peace, stillness, and deep sense of well-being that come from being immersed somewhere where there are not the difficulties of duality, the limitations of the world of the mind and the senses. For a few minutes, maybe an hour each day, one is allowed to merge into a vaster reality, where the problems that surround us so much of the time do not exist.

The states of *dhyana* gradually lead to the states of *samadhi*, where a higher level of consciousness is awakened. *Dhyana* is the first stage after transcending the thinking faculty of the mind, and from the point of view of the intellect it must be considered as an unconscious state. It is the first step beyond consciousness as we know it, which will lead eventually, by easy degrees, into the state of *samadhi*, the super-conscious state. The highest stages of *dhyana* are gradually transformed into the lower stage of *samadhi*, which is still not completely conscious. The higher state of *samadhi* represents a full awakening of one's own divinity.

The states of meditation slowly change. The heart is activated and the energy of love slows down the mind. The mind loses its power of control and individual consciousness is lost, at first for an instant and then gradually for longer periods of time. The lover becomes absorbed, drowned in the ocean of love.

Then in this state of unconsciousness a higher level of consciousness begins to awaken. At first there may be a sense of being-not an ego-identity, because this "being" is not separate, but contains everything within it. It is our true, unique self that is not separate from the whole. This awakening sense of being may be accompanied

by peace or bliss. This is the peace that belongs to the Absolute, the bliss that is the sheath of the soul (*ananda maya kosha*).

The difficulty of describing the experiences of *samadhi* is that they belong to a different level of reality, beyond the mind and its quality of distinction. This is a dimension of unity in which different states interpenetrate. In *samadhi* we begin to experience our true nature which is a state of oneness: we are what we experience. Gradually we glimpse, are infused with, the all-encompassing unity and energy of love that belong to the Self and underlie all life. And this oneness is not a static state, but a highly dynamic state of being that is constantly changing. Also our experience of it changes: no two meditations are the same and our experience becomes deeper and richer, more and more complete. On this plane of unity everything has its own place and fulfills its real purpose. Here the true nature of everything that is created is present as an expression of divine oneness and divine glory. In the outer world we experience only a fragmented sense of our self and our life. Here everything is complete and we come to know that everything is just as it should be.

Each wayfarer will have her own experiences as she glimpses the oneness and the true nature of her divinity. There are also different levels of reality beyond the ego. In different states of meditation one can be taken to these different levels. There is the plane of pure consciousness, *buddhi*, (or the "higher mind") which functions without the limitations of duality. This clear light of consciousness, undistorted by ego or desires, sees things in their real nature, in which their true purpose is revealed. Here the knower and the knowledge are one, in a knowing that belongs to our inner nature and its interconnectedness with all of life. Here the knowledge that we need is instantaneously accessible. (For most people this quality of "knowing" is experienced as intuition, in which we suddenly know something without any process of thought.) Pure consciousness is also a state of being in which awareness is present in its essential nature—the individual *is* a state of awareness.

And then the wayfarer can travel deeper, dissolve into the limitless ocean of love, which can seem like nothingness to the mind, but a nothingness that loves and cares for you with infinite tenderness. The love that is experienced beyond the mind is total and intoxicating; here there are no borders or limitations. The love that belongs to the outer world becomes just a pale, distorted reflection of this real love on the level of the soul. One is loved so completely and one realizes it was always like this only one did not know it; and this love and bliss become deeper and richer. The oneness of lover and Beloved, the meeting, merging, dissolving in love "like sugar in water," can only be hinted at. As Kabir says, "It cannot be told by the words of the mouth. It cannot be written on paper. It is like a dumb person who tastes a sweet thing. It cannot be explained." Awakening from these states, dazed and bewildered, one would gladly give everything for just another sip of this intoxicating wine.

And then further, beyond the borders of the known, is the realm of non-being, the frontier from which no news returns. Here all traces of the lover are absorbed, and one returns from these states knowing nothing except that one was taken. This is the true resting place of the mystic. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Qâdir Gîlânî,

Then the pilgrim returns home, to the home of his origin...that is the world of Allâh's proximity, that is where the home of the inner pilgrim is, and that is where he returns.

This is all that can be explained, as much as the tongue can say and the mind grasp. Beyond this no news can be given, for beyond is the unperceivable, inconceivable, indescribable.

## INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Sufi meditation of the heart is a simple practice that uses the energy of love to take the wayfarer Home. The lover gradually passes from the stage of *fanâ*, the annihilation of the self, to the stage of *baqâ*, abiding in God, or "abiding after passing away." Through the power of His love for us, which is hidden within the heart, we are awakened to love's unity that underlies all of life. Leaving behind the mind and the ego, we are able to enter the innermost chamber of the heart where lover and Beloved are one. Surrendering our ego-consciousness, we gradually become acclimatized to the inner dimensions of oneness, and at the same time create a vessel that can contain this higher consciousness. At first we may be frightened of a reality beyond the mind and the ego. But as the states of meditation change we become familiar with this state of absorption, are no longer fearful of being where the "lover," annihilated in love, does not exist:

Love has moved in and adorned the house, my self tied up its bundle and left. You imagine that you see me, but I no longer exist: what remains is the Beloved.

Meditation both takes us into the oneness of love and prepares us for this experience. T.S. Eliot wisely remarked, "human kind can not bear very much reality," and the tremendous experience of the eternal emptiness that lies beyond the mind and the ego can be terrifying. We are conditioned by the basic belief that we exist as an individual, separate entity. The ego is the center of our conscious awareness. In meditation we begin to glimpse a deeper truth, that the ego is an illusion and the outer world as insubstantial as a dream. In Shakespeare's words, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."

Of course many times when we meditate, even after years, the mind and its thoughts remain present. But then there are those times when we are taken, drawn by love into the vaster dimension of ourself. To awaken in the emptiness of the ego's annihilation is a bliss so disturbing that when we return to ordinary consciousness we can be dazed and confused, left bewildered at the roadside of life. We do not know what we have seen. The mind cannot comprehend the Truth told by the heart. And reports of those who have traveled this path only emphasize that the mind and ego cannot grasp what is experienced. Al-Junayd describes this state with paradoxical clarity: "Being wholly present in God, he is wholly lost to self. And thus he is present before God, absent in himself; absent and present at the same time. He is where he is not and he is not where he is."

We have to learn to contain the dynamic experiences of the inner worlds without being overwhelmed. To realize that "there is nothing but nothingness," and at the same time to live one's day-to-day life, cope with the responsibilities and problems of the world, takes years of preparation. Meditation both opens the inner eye and creates a quality of consciousness that can contain what we experience. Slowly the veils of

illusion that separate us from the dazzling darkness of the Beloved are lifted. A friend once had a dream in which she met her teacher and he had curtains falling from his hands. He said to her, "There are such mysteries here that it would blow away your mind if you were to glimpse them." Then he pointed out a path for her to follow that led into the distance.

Spiritual Truth is confusing to the mind; it vibrates at a higher frequency. Spiritual life is a question of speed. We need to be able to contain the dynamic vibrations of the Self; otherwise we would become dangerously unbalanced. Meditation creates an inner structure of consciousness that enables us to operate at a higher frequency. Through years of disciplined meditation we attune our whole being to the higher frequencies of divine love so that this intoxicating energy can flow through us.

Faster and faster flow the currents of love, faster and faster spins the heart. If we resist this energy we could be dangerously battered. If we were not centered we would be thrown off balance. The ego cannot provide the stability and center we need. It must be surrendered so that we can stand on the rock of the Self. Surrender allows us to spin with the dance of total devotion. And the totality of love that is given, in which even every cell of the body knows that it is loved, creates a sense of security that cannot be shaken.

As we learn to lose our mind in the empty spaces of the beyond, we long to be drawn deeper and deeper into this totality of loving, this bliss of abandonment. But we also need to be able to come back to our everyday world. The inner world with its intimacy and freedom from restraints is intoxicating, and it can make the outer world seem a cold, alien prison, a place where one can be known and loved in only a fragmented sense. The veils of this world, full of distortions and half truths, can be heavy and depressing after they have lifted even for just an instant. But one must not allow states of meditation to interfere with everyday life and work. One needs to be able to focus on the outer world and function on the level of the mind whenever necessary. Inwardly lost in love we always remain His servant, living in His world for His sake.

There was a disciple who, sitting in the presence of his teacher, slowly fell into meditation. Just as he was going into the state of *dhyana* his teacher suddenly asked, "How is your mother?" Coming painfully back to his senses, the disciple answered, "Thank you, Marahaj. She is very well." His head dropped back into the bliss of meditation when again his teacher asked, "How is your aunt?" Awakening again, he respectfully answered, "Very well, thank you." Once again he fell back into meditation, only to be brought back by another question from the teacher. So it continued until finally the sheikh allowed the man to meditate undisturbed. Later someone asked the sheikh why he interrupted the man's meditation. The sheikh replied, "He has to be able to come out of meditation at a moment's notice. We must not be attached even to our meditation."

Sufism is not a monastic or ascetic path. The Sufi wayfarer lives in the inner world of the heart as well as functioning responsibly in everyday life. Immersed in love's unity, we come to know our essential nature in which is engraved the deeper purpose of our life. Returning from meditation we bring the fragrance of this inner reality into our everyday life, and we are able to live grounded in the deep root of our being. Having

access to the plane of unity allows us to participate in life in a new way. We are able to live from the center of ourself, and so realize our deepest potential as human beings. We begin to see the way our life reflects the divine, how His name imprinted within our heart is reflected in our daily life. Knowing our own essential unity and how this unity is a part of the whole of life gives us a dynamic sense of purpose: we are no longer an isolated individual but an integral part of life's unfolding.

The journey of the Sufi is the journey of the lover returning to the arms of the Beloved, a journey of love in which we die to the limited ego-bound perspective of ourself. Drowned in love, in the formless emptiness that is beyond the mind, we discover that within us which is eternal, and awaken to the life within the heart. In this dynamically unfolding oneness the path and the seeker are forgotten. Only His formless Presence is real:

In God there is no duality. In that Presence "I" and "we" and "you" do not exist. "I" and "you" and "we" and "He" become one.... Since in the Unity there is no distinction, the Quest and the Way and the Seeker become one.

Knowing and living this unity, the lover reflects the light and love of the Beloved into his daily life. The secret of love's oneness becomes the ground upon which we walk, the essence of the air we breathe. Inwardly merged in our Beloved, we impress the stamp of His reality into each and every moment. Outwardly we see His oneness reflected in the world; we come to know the hidden face of creation, what the Sufis call the secret of the word *Kun!* (Be).

Attentive to Him, we are here to serve Him. The lover who has given himself in love has embraced the poverty of the heart, "having nothing and wanting nothing." Surrendered to our Beloved, we want nothing for ourself, not even the states of meditation. But through the mercy of His love for us He comes to us and takes us to Him. We become nourished from within, from the love and guidance that flow into the heart. Through the practice of meditation we are given access to the secrets of love, and can help to bring these secrets into the world.

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## NOTES

1. Quoted in Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 20. "*Nafs*" is a Sufi term for the lower nature, or ego.
2. Quoted by Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 49.
3. Quoted by Massingnon, Louis, *The Passion of al-Hallaj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 42.
4. "Whoso Knoweth Himself," from the Treatise on Being (*Risale-t-ul-wujudiyah*) (Abingdon, Oxon: Beshara Publications, 1976), pp. 3-4.

5. Quoted by Bhatnagar, R.S. *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought* (Dehli, India: Moyilal Banarsidass, 1984), p. 92
6. Quoted by Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, *Rûmî and Sufism* (Sausalito, California: The Post Apollo Press, 1987), p. 24.
7. Trans. Andrew Harvey, *Light upon Light* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996) , p. 181.
8. Mahmûd Shabistarî, quoted by Bhatnagar, p. 118.
9. Trans. Andrew Harvey, *Light upon Light*, p. 99.
10. Al-Qushayrî, *Principles of Sufism*, trans. B.B. Von Schlegell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1990), p. 159.
11. *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* are Sanskrit terms that come from the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya's development in India.
12. Irina Tweedie, unpublished lecture, "The Paradox of Mysticism," Wrekin Trust, "Mystics and Scientists Conference," 1985.
13. "*The Secret of Secrets*" trans. Tosun Bayrak (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), p. 87.
14. Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, trans. R. Gelpke (London: Bruno Cassirer, 1966), p. 195.
15. "Burnt Norton" ll. 42-3, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).
16. *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1954), iv. i. 146-7.
17. Quoted by Bhatnagar, p. 147.  
Mahmûd Shabistarî, quoted by Bhatnagar, p. 118.